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# Principals' Experiences of Autonomy in Nebraska Schools with Increased Hispanic/Latino Student Populations

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Principals' Experiences of Autonomy in Nebraska Schools with Increased  
Hispanic/Latino Student Populations

By

Gary Czapla

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
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Principals' Experiences of Autonomy in Nebraska Schools with Increased  
Hispanic/Latino Student Populations

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This phenomenological qualitative study explored the autonomy experienced by five Nebraska public school principals as they lead their respective schools that have growing Hispanic/Latino student populations. This study determined if the principals' autonomy has increased, decreased, or been impacted in any manner due to these changes of student demographics.

In-depth interviews were conducted with five principals working in schools where there has been an increase of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students over the last decade. This study revealed that the principals perceived that they have experienced a loss of autonomy as the demographics of their districts have changed. This study revealed the principals lacked autonomy to manage resources and personnel they deemed necessary to be an effective principal of a building with increased Hispanic/Latino/ELL students. This study also revealed that community perception, poverty and language barriers—as a result of the increase of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students—impacted principals' autonomy. In addition principals discussed the concept of tight/loose leadership and expressed concern on how tightly they were being managed by the district.

The following recommendations for further research and practice were determined from conducting this study.

**Recommendations for further study**

1. Conduct a further study with a larger sampling of principals.
2. Conduct a future study to determine if the loss of autonomy extends to principals regardless of student demographic changes.
3. Conduct a study of principals who have retained their autonomy despite demographic shifts in student populations.

**Recommendations for further practice**

1. Develop a consortium of principals who are faced with the challenges of having an increased Hispanic/Latino population to provide a greater voice in the state.
2. Identify districts who have found the balance of a tight/loose leadership system and then identify the steps those districts have taken to maintain the balance between the tight practices while also allowing principal autonomy.
3. Encourage college teacher preparation programs to focus on ELL certification of all teachers and to encourage bilingual speakers to consider teaching as a profession.

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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1—Introduction .....	1
Problem Statement .....	4
Purpose Statement.....	9
Significance.....	10
Central Question .....	11
Sub-questions.....	11
Definition of Terms.....	12
Delimitations and Limitation .....	13
Theoretical Perspective .....	13
Self-Determination Theory .....	14
Chapter 2—Literature Review .....	16
Chapter 3—Research Design and Methodology.....	26
Introduction.....	26
Research Design.....	26
Data Collection .....	28
Interview Questions .....	30
Data Analysis .....	32
Data Verification.....	34
Participants.....	35
Role of Researcher .....	37
Chapter 4--Participants .....	39
The Participants .....	39
Principal 1 .....	40

Principal 2 .....	41
Principal 3 .....	43
Principal 4 .....	44
Principal 5 .....	45
Chapter 5—Results .....	47
Question 1: What qualities are necessary to be an effective principal of a building with a growing population of Hispanic/Latino students? .....	48
Curriculum/Instruction.....	48
Data within Professional Learning Communities .....	49
Reading/Language Development.....	52
Communication with Families and Students .....	54
Visual/Belief .....	56
Question 2: “What obstacles currently exist which limit your autonomy to be an effective principal within your district as it relates to the changing demographic population? .....	58
Staffing.....	59
Question 3: What obstacles to autonomy does the demographic increase of Hispanic/Latino population itself bring which impacts your autonomy to be an effective principal? .....	61
Language Barrier .....	62
Poverty/Mobility .....	65
Question 4: With the increase in the Hispanic student population have there been any external obstacles you have encountered which have impacted your autonomy to be a principal? .....	69
Question 5: Has the increase in student demographics given you more autonomy as a principal? .....	74
Tight/Loose Leadership .....	78

Chapter 6—Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations .....	82
Summary .....	82
Discussion .....	83
What qualities are necessary to be an effective principal of a building with a growing population of Hispanic/Latino students? .....	83
What obstacles currently exist which limit your autonomy to be an effective principal within your district as it relates to the changing demographic population? .....	84
What obstacles to autonomy does the demographic increase of Hispanic/Latino population itself bring which impacts your autonomy to be an effective principal? .....	86
With the increase in the Hispanic student population have there been any external obstacles you have encountered which has impacted your autonomy to be a principal? .....	87
Has the increase in student demographics given you more autonomy as a principal? .....	89
Recommendations for Further Study .....	94
Recommendations for Further Practice .....	95
Conclusion .....	96
References .....	97
Appendices .....	104



### **List of Tables**

Table 1	Nebraska Districts with Most Proportional Growth in Hispanic Enrollment in Relation to Total District Enrollment from 2006-2007 to 2009-2010 .....	36
Table 2	Participant Demographics .....	39

**List of Appendices**

Appendix A	Informed Consent.....	104
Appendix B	Principal Contact.....	107

## Chapter I

### Introduction

The ultimate freedom for creative groups is the freedom to experiment with new ideas. Some skeptics insist that innovation is expensive. In the long run, innovation is cheap. Mediocrity is expensive—and autonomy can be the antidote.

—Tom Kelley General Manager, IDEO

—Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*

Daniel Pink's 2009 *New York Times* bestselling publication provided the main factors, which motivate individuals to excel. Pink attributes three elements essential to individual motivation: autonomy, mastery and purpose. While Pink utilized business as the backdrop to conduct his research, the findings Pink asserts can be applied to education as well (p. 186). The following educational research focuses on one of three elements of Pink's theory of motivation: autonomy and how it is experienced by public school principals. Current research around principal autonomy indicates a loss of autonomy for principals to carry out their work. A 2007 study of principal autonomy conducted by the Thomas Fordham Institute discovered the following:

For better or worse, public school principals are best viewed as middle managers in a much larger system of public education. They do not have the luxury of acting like CEOs, boldly leading their schools in new directions. Rather, their primary role is to buffer their schools and staffs from external pressures while meeting the demands placed upon them by district, state, and federal policies. (Adamowski, Therriault & Cavanna, 2007, p. 25)

As the demographic make-up of American schools evolves, how important is the autonomy of a public school principal and how has the impact of changing student demographics affected public school principals' autonomy? This qualitative study explores the role of principal autonomy in the state of Nebraska focusing on communities

that have seen a significant increase in the Hispanic/Latino student populations.

The rationale for examining principal autonomy through this sub-group is the fact that the Hispanic/Latino population is one of the fastest growing in the state of Nebraska in the past decade and Nebraska principals are being challenged to meet their academic needs. The degree to which principals have the autonomy to make decisions about how best to support this sub-group's needs is the central question that needs to be examined.

According to the Biennium Report of the Mexican American Commission, the Hispanic/Latino population has increased by 142% in the last decade (2008). However, the Hispanic/Latino student population remains one of the lowest performing in the state of Nebraska and the nation when it comes to meeting the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002). In 2010-11 only 43.59% Hispanics/Latinos reached proficiency level on the Nebraska State Accountability tests compared to a 70.58% proficiency level of their white peers (Nebraska Department of Education, 2011a).

But the rationale to conduct further studies regarding the academic success of Hispanic/Latino students goes beyond standardized achievement scores. As the population of Hispanic/Latino's continues to increase their future educational and economic success is imperative for the future well being of this country. President Barak Obama offered this insight:

At more than 54 million strong, including nearly 4 million in Puerto Rico, Hispanics constitute the country's largest and fastest-growing minority group. They have had a profound and positive impact on our country through among other things, their community's strong commitment to family, faith, hard work and service. . . . Our country was built on and continues to thrive on its diversity, and there is no doubt that the future of the United States is inextricably linked to the future of the Hispanic community. (Obama, 2011, p. 2)

While these changing demographics have changed the look of many Nebraska communities and schools, there also has been increased accountability placed upon school districts to meet the achievement needs of students. The implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has placed school accountability front and center in education. The legislation NCLB in 2001 imposed federal and state accountability mandates to hold districts responsible for improving academic achievement for all students in schools. NCLB enacts levels of sanctions against schools that fail to meet achievement goals. Whereas school principals were once the lead agents of reform, now NCLB has taken autonomy from building principals and placed increased school reform policies in the hands of district office officials. Since NCLB “districts have moved from being perceived as bureaucratic backwaters of education policy to being seen as potent sites and sources of educational reform” (Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2002, p. 1).

With the increased accountability demand to have all student groups perform at a proficient level, the role of the principal becomes even more critical. According to a 2012 study from the STAND Leadership for Children Organization, “effective principals are critical to developing and ensuring effective teaching, improving student achievement, and turning around low-performing schools” (Whitmire, 2012, p. 2). The study indicates that one critical component of an effective principal is whether or not the principal has the autonomy to lead the school: “For principals to fulfill their obligations to improve teaching and learning, hire and support excellent teaching staff, and establish a healthy school culture, they must be empowered to make the basic school-based decisions” (p. 7).

Whitmire (2012) further states that while all schools need effective principals, strong principal leadership is particularly important for low-performing schools in need of rapid improvement and may be the deciding factor between success and failure (p. 2). The idea of rapid improvement requiring strong leadership is important. The increase in the number of Hispanic/Latino students in Nebraska schools, coupled with the low-performance of this sub-group on standardized test scores and the penalties of the NCLB legislation, requires principals to act rapidly to meet the required standards. Could autonomy be the antidote to meet this need and do Nebraska principals have this autonomy to impact the necessary changes to increase Hispanic/Latino academic achievement?

### **Problem Statement**

It is no secret that the relatively recent surge of Mexican immigrants has created a sizable controversy here in America. As human nature so predictably dictates, many of us react with hostility. There is a murmur of dissent among us. The primordial call to defend our territory could prove to be the biggest blind fold over our eyes. That blindfold is a hindrance that we cannot allow to block our vision any longer. For when our eyes open, and we can behold the wonders of the beautiful Hispanic culture, we may finally embrace who are rightfully our brothers.

“A Commendable Uprising,” by Tim Kalantjaos, is the 2007 winning high school essay for the Nebraska Inaugural Hispanic Heritage Month State Commemoration Celebration. Nebraska senior Tim Kalantjakos’ essay gives us a perspective of how immigration of Hispanic/Latino immigrants has altered the cultural make-up of not only

the nation but also of the state of Nebraska. With the addition of a new culture to the established status quo, problems can emerge and as Mr. Kalantjakos notes “There is a murmur of dissent among us.”

Between 1990 and 2006, the Hispanic/Latino population more than doubled in 34 states. The cultural make-up of communities and schools is continuing to grow not only in major cities but also across the small towns of the Midwest. Nebraska ranked tenth on this list, with a 252.3% increase of its Hispanic/Latino population. The Hispanic/Latino population in Nebraska grew at a rate 20 times faster than the general population from 1990-2006 and they currently account for 49.1% of the state’s population growth (Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). This increase represents a significant shift in where Hispanic/Latino families are locating.

While areas of the country, particularly in the South and on the Coasts, have a concentrated population of Hispanic and Latino families and systems in place to adapt to the culture shift, this is a relatively new phenomenon for the Midwest, which lacks the supports necessary to adapt:

Nebraska appears to lack some of the elements conducive to positive adaptation for large numbers of labor immigrants and their children: the state has little recent experience with immigration; it lacks jobs at the top of the employment scale; it is predominantly white; and its new immigrant community, by definition, lacks the level of social capital and political power associated with older immigrant destinations. (Gouveia & Powell, 2007)

Reaction to this growth in the Hispanic/Latino population in Nebraska has not always been welcomed. According to a 2006 poll conducted by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 56% of Nebraska’s rural population perceives Latin immigration to Nebraska as a negative process (Nebraskans for Peace). The reaction to the growth of the

Hispanic/Latino population in Nebraska, as pointed out in the essay by Kalantjakos (2007) “*As human nature so predictably dictates, many of us react with hostility,*” is not uncommon. According to educational researchers Hamann, Murillo, and Wortham (2002), “Some members of host communities overtly denigrate the newcomers and fantasize about returning to a pre-Latino state; many do not. Even most of these, however, nonetheless participate in educational policies and practices that often label and constrain Latino students” (p. 4).

If the communities reacted in an unwelcoming manner where the increase in Hispanic and Latino families occurred, how then would the school system react to changing demographics in their educational settings?

Schools with students representing many diverse cultures increase opportunities for students to learn from minority cultures. However, meeting the achievement needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds—many times with different languages—has increased the challenges of public schools.

Graduation rates are one example of the divide that exists between Hispanic/Latino students and white students. The National Assessment for Educational Progress, which studied national trends in reading and mathematics from 1992-2009, there was no significant narrowing of the reading or mathematics achievement gap between Hispanic and White students (Planty, Kenna, & Hannes, 2009). The report also indicated a continued gap in achievement between Hispanic ELL students and non-ELL students.



Just as the achievement gap exists nationally between Hispanic/Latino students and white students, the same achievement gap exists in Nebraska. In 2011 almost 90% of all White students in Nebraska graduated compared to only 74% of Hispanic students. Hispanic students accounted for 11.6% of all 2011 graduates but for 26% of all dropouts (Abourzek, 2012). The reading and math results also display a similar achievement gap when compared to the national averages. Hispanic/Latino students scored nearly 22% lower in meeting state reading standards than white students and ELL students scored 34% lower in meeting reading standards compared to white students.

While the number of Hispanic students has increased, the number of Hispanic teachers and administrators remains extremely low in comparison. The demographics of school principals have not changed at the same rate. In the 2007–08 school year, only 17.6% of principals of all U.S. schools were from minority backgrounds (Battle & Gruber, 2009). In rural areas, 9.3% were minorities; and in small towns, just 6.2% were minorities. In the state of Nebraska minority teachers make up only 3% of the teaching force, while Hispanic teachers account for 1.4% of the teaching force (Nebraska Department of Education, 2011b). Having teachers who reflect the diversity of the students they teach is a critical component of minority students' success:

As pluralism increases, the teaching profession must reflect that diversity. It is essential for *all* teachers to have the knowledge, skills, and training to successfully teach diverse student populations. But it is equally important for *all* students to have the opportunity to be taught by teachers who reflect their diversity. Thousands of members of diverse ethnic and racial groups have the ability, skills, and knowledge to be outstanding teachers—and we need them. Minority educators enhance our students' understanding of the intellectual, social, political, and economic complexity of our democratic society. (Futrell, 1999, p. 30)

The dramatic shift in demographics across the Midwest challenges school principals to be effective leaders and to embrace the challenges of increased diverse student populations to meet all student achievement needs. Schools and districts must ensure that mainstream teachers receive professional development that focuses on language acquisition and offers specific strategies for these teachers to use with their ELL students. As a starting point, principals—particularly principals of middle level and high schools—must become more familiar with the research on language acquisition for ELL students (Flynn & Miller, 2008).

While researchers have identified the knowledge and skills principals must have to positively impact the achievement of Hispanic ELL students, do Nebraska principals have the autonomy to put these research recommendations into practice?

Public school principals are ultimately held accountable for the success or failure of all students' achievement including the Hispanic/Latino both regular Education and ELL students. The implementation of NCLB and its focus on meeting the stated goals places low-performing schools under increased sanctions, which may result in restructuring the school or replacing the schools instructional leader. According to Gail Connelly, the executive chair of NAESP,

Principals are under immense pressure to lead their schools in ways that produce the very best outcomes for the students they serve, and the burden of unnecessary bureaucratic limitations makes it even more challenging for principals to keep the promise of providing every child with a world-class education. (2009, p. 64)

With the increased pressure for principals to perform and research which indicates a necessity for autonomy on the part of the building principal to perform successfully, it

becomes increasingly important to examine principal autonomy in conjunction with schools which have been impacted by a sharp increase in minority students, especially schools which are not meeting the standards of No Child Left Behind.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the shared experiences regarding leadership autonomy by interviewing principals in the state of Nebraska where there has been a significant growth of school enrollment of Hispanic/Latino and Hispanic/Latino English Language Learner students in their schools and communities.

There are multiple factors that make a qualitative methodology a logical method to use to explore autonomy. The factors that impact a principal's autonomy could come from interactions with a school board, superintendent, the community culture, a reaction to the changing demographics in the school and community, etc. These interactions would be difficult to measure without the shared experiences of the principals. According to researcher John Creswell, "Interactions among people, for example, are difficult to capture with existing measures, and these measures may not be sensitive to issues such as gender differences, race, economic status, and individual differences" (2007, p. 40). While overt discriminatory perspectives based on race and ethnicity may be difficult to discern, accessing the shared experiences of the principals will enable me to capture their perceptions of autonomy in dealing with these changing demographics, and, when applicable, their perceptions of how factors such as race and class might be impacting their degree of freedom.

Phenomenological studies focus on the voices of those impacted by a shared experience. Phenomenological research has been used in the fields of social and health sciences and education (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). Creswell indicates the use of phenomenological study is appropriate when “trying to understand several participants’ common experiences of a phenomenon” (p. 60). Since this research will study multiple principals across the state of Nebraska and their common experiences with principal autonomy, the phenomenological design is an appropriate method to conduct this research.

### **Significance**

The role and research of autonomy in the field of education is not new. A Google search of teachers and autonomy will reveal many research studies spanning a wide range of years. However, while there have been many studies conducted about teachers and autonomy in their classrooms, there has been significantly less documented research regarding principal’s autonomy and even fewer studies regarding principal autonomy in schools where there has been an increase in Hispanic/Latino student populations. With the continued growth of Hispanic/Latino students in Nebraska schools and across the nation, it is important to understand the impact of a principal’s autonomy on their education.

This study is also important to consider for reasons other than the impact on Hispanic/Latino students. First, this study will document experiences of selected principals across the state of Nebraska and consider the impact autonomy has had on their ability to meet the needs of their changing demographics. Second, this study will allow

board members and superintendents an opportunity to hear the voices of principals and reflect on the level of autonomy given to their building principals. Finally this study will consider how principals reflect on their own experiences of autonomy as leaders in relationship to their superintendents, staffs and their communities as a whole.

### **Central Question**

Do principals in schools with growing Hispanic/Latino student numbers feel (report) they have the autonomy to lead initiatives that respond to the needs of these students?

### **Sub-questions.**

1. What does it mean to be an effective principal of a building with a growing population of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students?
2. What obstacles currently exist within a Nebraska school district that limit principal's autonomy to be an effective principal as it relates to the changing demographic population?
3. What obstacles to autonomy does the demographic increase of Hispanic/Latino population itself bring which impacts principal's autonomy to be an effective principal?
4. With the increase in the Hispanic student population have there been any external obstacles principals encountered that has impact upon their autonomy to be a principal?
5. Has principal autonomy increased to lead a building as a result of a growing population of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students?

## Definition of Terms

*Culture*—Shared values, understandings, symbols, and practices of a group of people.

*English as a second language (ESL) program*—A daily developmental second language program of up to two periods of instruction based on student needs where students learn comprehension, speaking, reading and writing in English using second language teaching techniques, and incorporates the cultural aspects of the students' experiences in their ESL instruction (New Jersey Department of Education, 2008).

*English Language Learner (ELL)* —A new label used to refer to LEP or ESL students. It is used to refer to students who qualify for ESL services.

*Hispanic*—A Spanish-speaking person of Latin-American origin who lives in the U.S. Language minority students: students whose language community is different from the dominant language group. In the U.S., a language-minority student may be bilingual, limited-English proficient, or English monolingual (Lessow-Hurley, 1991).

*Latino*—A person of Latin-American or Spanish-speaking descent living in the United States.

*Autonomy*—defined by Webster's as "1: the quality or state of being self-governing; *especially*: the right of self-government 2: self-directing freedom and especially moral independence 3: a self-governing state" (Webster's II New College Dictionary, 1995).

*Defined Autonomy*—a balancing act, with districts being directive in some areas, such as establishing goals and expectations for achievement, setting a general course for

continuous improvement and defining high standards of performance for all personnel (Eck & Goodwin, 2010).

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations are the factors that prevent a researcher from claiming that one's findings are true for all people in all times and places (Bryant, 2004). It is important in a qualitative study to declare the limitations of the study. The researcher recognizes all the limitations of the study place, time, circumstances that render a study atypical (Wolcott, 1990). Delimitations of this study narrowed the scope to only schools in Nebraska with increasing demographics of Hispanic/Latino student populations. The limitations in this study are that only five principals and five schools are part of the research being conducted. This study is also limited by the self-reporting of the principals and the meanings derived from the self-reporting by the researcher.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

*A leader is best  
When people barely know he exists  
Of a good leader, who talks little,  
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,  
They will say, "We did this ourselves."  
— Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching*

While conducting the literature review on the concept of "autonomy," the researcher discovered many similarities across several disciplines. As the researcher conducted the literature review, common threads regarding autonomy emerged through these areas. The fields of psychology, business, and educational studies of autonomy develop similar conclusions about the need of autonomy for individuals to succeed.

Leadership has been studied in many different arenas through the centuries. This study explores one quality of leadership: autonomy. Autonomy for this study is defined by Webster's as "1: the quality or state of being self-governing; *especially*: the right of self-government 2: self-directing freedom and especially moral independence 3: a self-governing state." Utilizing this definition we can begin exploring the concept of autonomy. First, we will examine autonomy through psychologists Deci and Ryan's (1985) theory of self-determination. Next, we will look at autonomy and its relationship to the evolution of business organizations, and finally we will explore autonomy in the research on educational leadership.

### **Self Determination Theory**

The concept of autonomy is not new to the world of psychology. Psychologists have looked at what factors motivate people to succeed, overcome obstacles or feel accomplished. Autonomy for individuals has emerged as one factor in meeting individuals' needs. One theory developed by psychologists Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan (1985) is the theory of Self-determination, which includes the concept of autonomy as a critical factor. Deci and Ryan's Self-determination theory (SDT) "maintains that an understanding of human motivation requires a consideration of innate psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness" (p. 227).

Deci and Ryan's theory (1985) maintains that self-determination and intrinsic motivation relies on three major components interacting with each other. The individual must have a sense of competence or the ability to identify individual challenging tasks and extends one's skills to adapt to the complex and changing environments (Deci &



Ryan, 2000). The idea of competence is mirrored by Pinks findings of the need for mastery (Pink, 2009).

The second identifying characteristic of Self-determination theory is relatedness. Baumeister and Leary (1995) define relatedness as individuals' inherent propensity to feel connected to the other, that is, to be a member of a group, to love and care and be loved and cared for. Individuals strive to be related and this component of the Self-determination Theory is satisfied when people experience a sense of communion and develop close and intimate relationships with others (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The third characteristic is one of autonomy or an individual's desire to feel volitional and to experience a sense of choice and psychological freedom when carrying out an activity (deCharms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 2000). This study focuses on this third characteristic. The notion of autonomy is essential to creating intrinsic motivation in individuals. When individuals have this sense of volition in their lives, the productivity of their work also increases. A 1985 study performed by Deci and Ryan indicated that extrinsic rewards based on competition and controlled environment actually led to decreased individual motivation and performance. Deci, Connell, & Ryan (1989), discovered that providing autonomy support—relative to control—resulted in more positive outcomes, including greater intrinsic motivation, increased satisfaction and enhanced well-being. These theories regarding autonomy will help in the analysis of the interview data.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Psychology is not the only field that looks at the importance of autonomy.

Organizations, particularly business and business management, have performed multiple studies about increased productivity among its workforce. What these research studies have uncovered is that autonomy plays a major factor in the success of businesses. A broad view of autonomy in the workplace can begin with the work of social psychologist Douglas McGregor. McGregor (2006) was a professor at MIT and through his research published *The Human Side of Enterprise*. This book was significant in examining the conventional way of managing workers in business, which McGregor called Theory X and a new, unconventional way of managing workers that McGregor called Theory Y. Theory X style of management (McGregor, 2006) operates from the following set of premises:

1. Management is responsible for organizing the elements of productive enterprise—money, materials, equipment, people—in the interest of economic ends.
2. With respect to people, this is a process of directing their efforts, motivating them, controlling their actions, modifying their behavior to fit the needs of the organization.
3. Without this active intervention by management, people would be passive—even resistant—to organizational needs. They must therefore be persuaded, rewarded, punished, controlled—their activities must be directed. This is management's task—in managing subordinate managers or workers. We often sum it up by saying that management consists of getting things done through other people. (p. 343)

McGregor (2006) acknowledged that for some of management tasks, this “carrot and stick” approach worked to reach workers’ lower level physiological needs such as safety.

However, once a worker had met the lower level needs, Theory X no longer meets the needs of the worker. To meet the higher level needs, a business must provide the component of McGregor's Theory Y management style, (McGregor, 2006), which includes the following principles:

1. Management is responsible for organizing the elements of productive enterprise— money, materials, equipment, people—in the interest of economic ends.
2. People are not by nature passive or resistant to organizational needs. They have become so as a result of experience in organizations.
3. The motivation, the potential for development, the capacity for assuming responsibility, the readiness to direct behavior toward organizational goals are all present in people. Management does not put them there. It is a responsibility of management to make it possible for people to recognize and develop these human characteristics for themselves.
4. The essential task of management is to arrange organizational conditions and methods of operation so that people can achieve their own goals best by directing their own efforts toward organizational objectives. (p.351)

McGregor (2006) was not the only influential researcher to challenge the Theory X style of management. Peter Drucker, the renowned business consultant, writer and professor, examined multiple facets of business. One of his more progressive concepts examined the idea of self-management.

Peter Drucker (1999) is one of the more influential minds of business leadership and promoted the idea of worker autonomy through phrases he coined such as “knowledge work” and “knowledge worker” (p. 135). Drucker asserted that if a business were to advance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the productivity of businesses would be dependent on the ability to have workers manage and direct themselves (p. 142). Drucker presented six attributes of successfully fulfilling the concept of knowledge worker productivity:

1. Knowledge worker productivity demands that we ask the question: “What is the task?”
2. It demands that we impose the responsibility for their productivity on the individual knowledge workers themselves. Knowledge workers have to manage themselves. They have to have autonomy.
3. Continuing innovation has to be part of the work, the task and the responsibility of knowledge workers.
4. Knowledge work requires continuous learning on the part of the knowledge worker, but equally continuous teaching on the part of the knowledge worker.
5. Productivity of the knowledge worker is not--at least not primarily--a matter of the quantity of output. Quality is at least as important.
6. Finally, knowledge worker productivity requires that the knowledge worker is both seen and treated as an ‘asset’ rather than as a ‘cost’. It requires that knowledge workers want to work for the organization in preference to all other opportunities.

Clearly Drucker (1999) supports the need for autonomy in the workplace if organizations are not only to survive but also to thrive.

A more recent example of research that supports the need for autonomy as a critical component of organizational success comes from Jim Collins (2001) research book of successful companies called *Good to Great*. Collins’ book discusses the concept of the “Culture of Discipline.” This concept embraces the notion that having the right people, in the right positions with a clear purpose, are instrumental to the success of an organization. Collins does not say that an organization operates without structure. However, he contends that a consistent operating framework needs to be in place where workers have the freedom, autonomy if you will, to make decisions and contribute to the overall purpose of the organization: “The good-to-great companies built a consistent system with clear constraints, but they also gave people freedom and responsibility within the framework of that system. They hired self-disciplined people who didn’t need to be managed, and then managed the system, not the people” (p. 125).

McGregor (2006), Drucker (1999), Collins (2001) and Pink (2009) all established through their research the need for autonomous workers if an organization is to thrive. While these researchers have focused primarily on the business world, their findings are in line with the research being done in the educational realm as well.

A review of the literature in regards to principal autonomy first reveals there is significantly less research done on principal autonomy in comparison to the research done on autonomy in the psychology or business fields. However, the research does indicate a degree of autonomy can have a positive effect on student achievement. It is important to point out that the findings regarding principal autonomy do not promote limitless autonomy for principals. Rather, the research indicates that a “defined autonomy” leads to greater student achievement. Two leading educational researchers, Timothy Waters and Robert Marzano (2007), discovered an interesting dichotomy with the relationship of student achievement and principal autonomy. In their meta- analysis of effective leadership, they discovered a positive correlation between school autonomy yet found a negative correlation for site-based management. The two researchers concluded that autonomy was effective for student achievement if there are clear non-negotiable goals in place allowing building principals to decide how to best meet those goals (2007). Marzano and Waters’ findings appear to closely align with the findings of Jim Collins (2001) who noted that successful companies operate within a clear framework but at the same time allow for autonomy within that operating framework.

As Marzano and Waters (2007) discovered, limitless autonomy for principals does not equate to increased student achievement. Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley

(2009), authors of *The Fourth Way: the Inspiring Future for Educational Change*, express a similar conviction. Hargreaves and Shirley's early educational efforts, which they call the First Way, allowed educators to operate with absolute autonomy.

Unfortunately this absolute autonomy created a number of issues:

There was no leadership development to create consistency of impact or effort. Parents had no way of knowing how their children were doing in school beyond the information conveyed on report cards. Fads were adopted uncritically, and many young radicals turned schools upside down during their brief tenures before leaving for greener pastures. (p. 5)

While Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) acknowledged that limitless autonomy led to serious issues in education, they also discovered a lack of autonomy has equal repercussions. When the education reform entered what Hargreaves and Shirley referred to as the "Second Stage," autonomy was no longer granted to school leaders. Instead, top-down government mandates were placed upon schools including extreme pressures to meet those standards. Educators felt a loss of professional judgment and autonomy and the downsides of the "Second Way" were significant as little evidence of long-lasting student achievement resulted (p. 11). "The costs to the quality, depth, and breadth of children's learning were considerable. School dropouts increased, site-based innovations declined, teacher quality suffered, and so did teacher retention" (p. 11). Hargreaves and Shirley contended that as of 2009, the United States still is in the "Second Way" of educational reform (p. 15).

What Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) concluded about leadership autonomy is similar to the findings of Waters and Marzano (2007). Through their research Hargreaves and Shirley argued "that true educational reform must create a system where the

government should help steer the educational system but not micromanage or interfere with the details.” Unfortunately for educational leaders, the current system has placed principals in the role of being line managers as opposed to educational leaders and has placed upon them greater responsibilities with decreasing autonomy: It is rare to have an explicit strategy of leadership development that connects it directly to strategies of educational reform, yet change without leadership has no chance of being sustainable. The leadership agenda is the change agenda. They are one and the same. The reform environment has to create conditions where leaders do not merely implement external mandates, but have the capacity and flexibility to make changes themselves (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 95).

Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) identify a possible gap between the autonomy which is needed to be an effective administrator and the current level of autonomy given to principals due to the Second Way reform movements. While the literature review of business and psychology clearly indicates a need for autonomy, one of the difficulties of affording principals the same level of autonomy has been impacted by the increased national standards of student achievement. With the adoption of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), the pressures on principals to perform have dramatically increased:

After all, under the then-new No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) school leaders were being held ever more to account for raising the achievement of their pupils and the performance of their schools. In many states, principals who didn’t get satisfactory results could even lose their jobs. (Adamowski et al., 2007, p. 7)

Research conducted in 2007 by Adamowski et al. (2007) finds principals see their roles as middle managers as opposed to school leaders:

Squeezed between federal, state, and district policies, procedures, and contractual

obligations on one side, and classroom teachers (and other school staff members) on the other, the district principals whom we interviewed see themselves as middle managers, not as CEOs or necessarily even instructional leaders. They find themselves balancing the challenge of maintaining a school climate that is conducive to teaching and learning with the need to accommodate the outside pressures, reporting requirements, and demands of the district and state. Indeed, many principals commented that they feel responsible for buffering their staff from external demands and policies so as to maximize the potential of their schools' learning environments. (p. 33)

This research demonstrates principals are not afforded the level of autonomy as put forth by Waters and Marzano (2007), Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) to have the necessary impact on student achievement. This study also demonstrates a gap between what psychologists Deci and Ryan (2000) and business researchers McGregor (2006), Drucker (1999), Collins (2001) and Pink (2009) have put forth as a necessary level of autonomy for continued success.

The concept of “defined autonomy” for principals has been successful according to research. One can look at the success of the New York’s Children First Reform Initiative as an example. Under Chancellor Joel Klein’s direction, the effectiveness of district offices empowering schools through increased defined autonomy was illustrated. The Children First Reform Initiative created autonomy zones. Principals from these zones have reported that the initiative allowed them to make better use of their time and resulted in network meetings that were far more productive than the regional meetings they formerly attended. In addition, these schools have more discretion over budgeting, hiring, and curriculum choices (New York City Department of Education, 2010). Although it is unclear whether there are other mitigating factors influencing student performance, there appears to be a correlation between flexible yet accountable



leadership at the school level and focused support at the district level (American Institute for Research, 2010, p. 8).

One only needs to look at Finland, one of the world's leaders in education, for proof that autonomy for leaders and teachers can have a profound impact on student achievement. Finland ranks first or second in performance areas of literacy, mathematics and science according to the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment tables (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 51). According to this study the Finish have been successful because the state steers, but does not prescribe in detail, the national curriculum (p. 53). One of the key reforms of the Finnish educational system was the decentralization of the educational system to increase creativity and flexibility in the schools (p. 53). Again we see a system which has guidelines (steers) but allows autonomy by not prescribing the details to accomplish the task at hand:

the Finns have one of the world's most successful educational systems (as measured by the PISA tests) without so much as a nod to Friedman. They have dispensed with the machinery of educational accountability such as detailed national curriculums school inspections, high stakes examinations and school vouchers. All children attend comprehensive school from age seven to sixteen; there is no break between primary and secondary school. Teachers experiment with lots of different styles of teaching but tend to emphasize creativity and group learning. They make extensive use of tests but only to diagnose students rather than to classify them. (Special Report: The Nordic Countries, 2013, p. 5)

The literature does provide suggestions on what autonomy for principals should entail for student achievement. According to a 2010 study through the American Institutes for Research:

Building leadership capacity requires that multiple stakeholders be engaged in the work and decision making of school transformation. The school leader should seek greater engagement among building stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and students in the development of school goals and objectives. District

and school leaders should set clear goals and expectations for increasing student achievement; lead the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; ensure that time and resources are maximized to support instructional improvement; and then provide principals at the building level and teachers at the classroom level with flexibility and autonomy to meet their goals given their school or classroom context. (2010, p. 7)

When one considers the challenges of the No Child Left Behind Legislation (2002) for principals in Nebraska schools where there is an increase in Hispanic/Latino students, it is critical for the researcher to consider the importance of autonomy a principal has in his or her school. Other research also indicates the concept of “defined autonomy” for principals to have success in leading their schools. James Eck and Bryan Goodwin (2010) offer this definition of defined autonomy: “Defined autonomy for school leaders is probably best described as a balancing act, with districts being directive in some areas, such as establishing goals and expectations for achievement, setting a general course for continuous improvement and defining high standards of performance for all personnel” (pp. 24-27).

Once again we see as we did with Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) that there has to be direction from a higher power than principals to define the parameters. Still, Eck and Goodwin (2010) reaffirm the need for autonomy when they state:

At the same time, effective district leaders recognize that some actions are best left up to principals, such as evaluating personnel based on district-approved criteria, developing or removing staff as necessary to meet performance standards, and developing cultures of high expectations within their own schools. (p. 26)

Based on this literature review, the researcher concludes that there is a level of autonomy among individuals that must be met if an individual, an organization, or a principal can experience success in meeting the goal or goals set forth. This was evident

from the literature summarizing research in the fields of psychology, business, and education. However, the research also indicates there is a need to clearly define autonomy for individuals, organizations, or building principals in order to experience success in reaching one's goals.

If, then, there is indeed a positive correlation between increased building principal autonomy and increased student achievement as pointed out by Waters and Marzano's (2007) meta-analysis of effective school leadership practices the question then becomes how much autonomy is needed for Nebraska principals to address the lagging educational success of Hispanic/Latino students compared to their white counterparts? This qualitative study seeks to answer that question.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Design and Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

This phenomenological qualitative study attempted to explore the autonomy experienced by a group of Nebraska public school principals to lead their respective schools where the Hispanic/Latino student population has increased substantially over the past decade. This study attempted to identify if the principals' autonomy has increased, decreased, or been impacted in any manner due to these changes of student demographics. The implementation of the No Child Left Behind Legislation (2002) has increased the level of accountability for student achievement of public school principals. NCLB also has increased the level of accountability for Hispanic/Latino students, the fastest growing sub-group in the state of Nebraska. It therefore becomes imperative to discover if principals retain their autonomy to lead and make the necessary decisions to increase the achievement level of Hispanic/Latino students in their schools.

#### **Research Design**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences related to the autonomy Nebraska principals experienced to lead their schools as the student demographics (specifically Hispanic/Latino students) increased. Understanding the complex nature of leadership autonomy would be difficult to capture in a quantitative study. Therefore, it became the decision of the researcher to utilize a qualitative method to investigate and understand the phenomenon of autonomy. Qualitative research is conducted "because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established

by talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40).

There are various methods of conducting qualitative research. Creswell (2007) identifies five different types of studies to conduct qualitative research: Narrative, Phenomenology, Grounded Theory, Ethnography, and Case Study (p. 53). “The use of a qualitative design allows the researcher to study the context and human interactions of the participants to lead the researcher to a greater understanding of why and how the participants responded to the experience as they did” (Creswell, 2007). While these methods differ to aid the researcher in examining a specific type of question, Merriam (2009) identifies characteristics common to almost all qualitative research studies:

- Qualitative research is process oriented rather than outcome or product oriented.
- The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection.
- The researcher is interested in the meanings that people give to their experiences.
- The researcher is a field observer who views behavior in its natural setting.
- Qualitative research is descriptive. The researcher is concerned with providing a rich, thick description of what is seen and heard. (pp.14-16)

Qualitative research has been utilized and proven as an effective method to conduct research studies in not only the fields of anthropology, management science, and social work but also in education (Merriam, 2009). For the purpose of this study, the phenomenological approach was used. According to Welman and Kruger (1999) “the phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved” (p. 189). Since this study is looking at multiple principals’ experiences with autonomy, it was important to select a qualitative

methodology to capture those experiences. A researcher selects the phenomenological procedure when it “is important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon. It would be important to understand these common experiences in order to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60).

### **Data Collection**

The collection of data for this phenomenological study was obtained by conducting two interviews. The first interview was conducted by a phone interview and the second interview was face-to-face with each of the participants at their place of work. Interviewing participants in their natural setting is an important aspect of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). The researcher conducted a 30-45 minute phone interview and an one-hour-interview with each of the participants.

The first interview, conducted by phone, was done to gain knowledge about the story behind the participants (McNamara, 1999). The participants background, life events, prior experience all help the researcher delve deeper into the phenomenon being experienced. The first interview also provided the researcher with data into what makes an effective principal of a school with changing student demographics. The second interview conducted face-to-face was used to identify key stories, phrases or events, which relate directly to the concept of principal autonomy (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The researcher also conducted follow-up interviews via phone calls where clarification of the primary interview data was needed and follow up questions were asked. These follow up questions or probes were an important aspect of the interview process (Merriam, 2009,

p. 114). Creswell (2007) noted data collected for phenomenological studies consists of in-depth interviews and multiple interviews with the participants (p. 61).

Interviews were only one source of data the researcher obtained to perform the study. A second source of data came through the form of researcher observation. For this study the researcher collected field notes documenting what the researcher saw to help paint a more complete picture of where the experience of the participant was occurring. Observational field notes typically contained:

- verbal descriptions of the setting, the people, the activities;
- direct quotations or at least the substance of what people said; and
- observer's comments-put in the margins or in the running narrative and identified by underlining, italics, or bold and bracketing, and the initials "OC." (Merriam, 2009, p. 131)

Other reasons for a qualitative researcher to collect observational data include: record behavior as it is happening, provide knowledge of the context or to provide specific incidents, and finally to observe firsthand any discrepancies if the participant is reluctant to discuss the topic (Merriam, 2009, p. 119).

In order to record the data from an observation the researcher documented descriptive field notes during the observation and then immediately after the observation the researcher added any reflective comments. The researcher then used these observational field notes to add depth or clarification as the researcher moved back and forth between the data and analysis.

Participants were contacted initially through e-mail to gauge their interest in participating in the study. The researcher then contacted the participants district office via e-mail and an additional phone contact to obtain permission from the district to

interview the participant. A formal letter was then sent to each of the participants detailing the study with the appropriate permissions to interview and audiotape the participants. The researcher then contacted each participant by phone or e-mail to establish the time of the interviews. Interview data was audio-taped and field notes were taken by the researcher. Data was and continues to be stored in a secure location accessible by only the researcher.

### **Interview Questions**

1. What does it mean to be an effective principal of a building with a growing population of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students?
2. What obstacles currently exist within a Nebraska school district that limit principal's autonomy to be an effective principal as it relates to the changing demographic population?
3. What obstacles to autonomy does the demographic increase of Hispanic/Latino population itself bring which impacts principal's autonomy to be an effective principal?
4. With the increase in the Hispanic student population have there been any external obstacles principals encountered that has impacted their autonomy to be a principal?
5. Has principal autonomy increased to lead a building as a result of a growing population of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students?

The phenomenological qualitative study typically considers two general, broad questions, which operate as the basis for collecting interview data. What have you



experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

The central question of this qualitative phenomenological study was: What are the shared experiences of principals in relation to the level of autonomy they have to lead their schools in light of increased populations of Hispanic/Latino students in their schools and communities?

The sub questions asked of the participants were:

1. What does it mean to be an effective principal of a building with a growing population of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students?
2. What obstacles currently exist within a Nebraska school district that limit principal's autonomy to be an effective principal as it relates to the changing demographic population?
3. What obstacles to autonomy does the demographic increase of Hispanic/Latino population itself bring which impacts principal's autonomy to be an effective principal?
4. With the increase in the Hispanic student population have there been any external obstacles principals encountered that has impact their autonomy to be a principal?
5. Has principal autonomy increased to lead a building as a result of a growing population of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students?

## **Data Analysis**

Analysis means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories. It often involves synthesis, evaluation, interpretation, categorization, hypothesizing, comparison, and pattern finding. It always involves what Wolcott (1990) calls “mindwork.” Researchers always engage their own intellectual capacities to make sense of qualitative data (Hatch, 2002, p. 148).

There are different approaches offered by researchers in the field of qualitative study recommended as a process for analysis of the collected data. Moustakas (1994) provided the following steps to analyze the data:

1. Transcripts of the data are reviewed to discover significant statements, sentences or quotes.
2. The researcher will then develop the cluster of significant statements into themes.
3. The researcher will then write a description of the participants experiences reflected in the discovered themes as it relates the phenomenon of autonomy.
4. The researcher then will provide an overall description of the common experiences of the participants in relationship to the phenomenon of autonomy.

For the analysis of this study the researcher utilized a constant comparison method to analyze the data collected in this study and axial coding. The constant comparative process was originally used as a method of conducting data analysis for

grounded theory qualitative studies. However this method has been used for many different styles of qualitative studies. According to Hatch (2002), to perform a constant comparison analysis, the researcher first reads through the entire set of data (this also could be a subset of the data). After doing so, the researcher chunks the data into smaller meaningful parts. Then, the researcher labels each chunk with a descriptive title or a “code.” The researcher takes pains to compare each new chunk of data with previous codes, so similar chunks will be labeled with the same code. After all the data have been coded, the codes are grouped by similarity, and a theme is identified and documented based on each grouping (p. 565).

Glaser (1978) recommended the following steps in the constant comparison method of analysis:

1. Begin collecting data.
2. Look for key issues, recurrent events, or activities in the data that become categories for focus.
3. Collect data that provide many incidents of the categories of focus with an eye to seeing the diversity of the dimensions under the categories.
4. Write about the categories that you are exploring, attempting to describe and account for all the incidents you have in your data while continually searching for new incidents.
5. Work with the data and emerging model to discover basic social processes and relationships.

6. Engage in sampling, coding, and writing as the analysis focuses on the core categories.

The researcher utilized these recommendations to move back and forth between the data sets identifying meaningful ideas, phrases, etc. . . . reflecting, adding to or creating new codes until all the data is reviewed. The initial coding fractures the data (Creswell, 2007) and then to reassemble the data the researchers utilizes axial coding. Axial coding answers the questions of when, where, why, who, how and with what consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 125). This method allows the researcher to reduce the data to significant themes in order to write the final narrative.

### **Data Verification**

Qualitative research as quantitative research must be conducted in a rigorous manner. To have any effect on either the practice of the theory of a field, “research studies must be rigorously conducted; they need to present insights and conclusions that ring true to readers, practitioners, and other researchers” (Merriam, 2009, p. 210). Qualitative research meets this challenge by ensuring the methods used are both reliable and valid. Qualitative validity means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures, while qualitative reliability indicates that the researcher’s approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects (Gibbs, 2007). For this study the researcher used two procedures recommended by Gibbs (2007) to make sure approaches used are reliable:

- The transcripts were transcribed professionally and then re-checked by the researcher to make sure no errors occurred.

- The researcher created a codebook to ensure the researcher does not shift the meaning of the codes as data is analyzed.

The researcher used multiple validation procedures recommended by Creswell (2007) to check for accuracy in the research findings.

- Triangulation of data, which for this study included the primary interview, literature review and follow up interviews.
- Member checking which asks participants to review the transcripts for accuracy or for further clarification of the information.
- The researcher clarified any bias in regards to his experience with the phenomenon being studied.
- The researcher attempted to utilize a rich, thick description of the settings of the participants to provide a deeper understanding of the setting where the phenomenon occurred.

### **Participants**

Using data provided from the Nebraska Department of Education (2011a) the researcher then further examined the demographical data of each school within these districts to determine which individual schools experienced the greatest percentage of growth of Hispanic/Latino students. The researcher then contacted the district official to obtain permission to conduct research. Upon receiving permission, individual building principals were contacted by e-mail to ask for their participation in the study. The invitations to participate were sent out at one time and the first five principals to respond

were selected for the study. The researcher then assigned an alphabetic letter to each of the districts to protect the identity of the participants.

Table 1

*Nebraska Districts with Most Proportional Growth in Hispanic Enrollment in Relation to Total District Enrollment from 2006-2007 to 2009-2010*

District Name	Growth in Hispanic Enrollment since 2006-2007	Total District Enrollment 2009-2010	Proportional Growth in Latino Enrollment
District A	308	1,783	17.3%
District B	200	1,683	11.9%
District C	794	8,902	8.9%
District D	23	276	8.3%
District E	49	603	8.1%
District F	261	3,632	7.2%
District G	252	3,820	6.6%
District H	179	2,840	6.3%
District I	201	3,512	5.7%
District J	2,403	48,692	4.9%
District K	200	4,569	4.4%
District L	132	3,154	4.2%
District M	105	3,999	2.6%

Source: Nebraska Department of Education (2011a)

The intent of this study was to explore the experiences related to the autonomy Nebraska School Principals had to lead their schools as the student demographics

specifically Hispanic/Latino students increased. In order to conduct a study with limited resources and limited time it became necessary to narrow the number of participants in the study. Creswell (2007) recommends it is necessary for qualitative research to identify individuals who have experienced or who can relate to the central phenomenon being studied thus purposeful sampling was used in these qualitative studies (p. 125). By utilizing the Nebraska Department of Education Website (2011b) the researcher was able to identify the school districts with the largest percentage of Hispanic students in the state.

Dukes (1984) recommended using 3 to 10 subjects when conducting a phenomenological qualitative study. Therefore 5 principals were invited to participate in this study representing the 5 school districts with the highest percentage of Hispanic/Latino students.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In a qualitative study the investigator is the primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data, and as such, can respond to situations by maximizing opportunities for collecting and producing meaningful information (Merriam, 2009). It is then critical for the researcher to epoche (refrain from judging) or bracket their potential bias. While it has been argued that setting aside all bias is not possible (Merriam, 2009) it has been used as common practice in qualitative research.

As a building principal in the state of Nebraska for the past seven years, I have been intrigued by the true autonomy of a building principal to lead their school. Currently as the principal of a Title I building, I am well aware of the pressures of

increased accountability. With the recent addition of an English Language Learner's program, I am further intrigued by my own autonomy to lead with the change in demographics. Currently the district makes many of the decisions in terms of funding of the ELL program, the curriculum offered to ELL students and it was reported that our ELL teachers while in the building are the responsibility of the Federal Program Supervisor who works in the district office. Being as my experience with ELL is limited and I have no formal training with an ELL program, I am far from prepared to recognize all of the issues needed to effectively lead an ELL program. However as a building principal, I have a desire to quickly learn and play a lead role in the direction of the ELL program. This leads me to ponder if after acquiring the knowledge necessary to fully grasp the complexities of an ELL program if I will be granted the autonomy to lead as I see fit or will the power to make decisions remain out of my control. My reflection on this has led me to wonder if other principals in the state are more or less autonomous to lead their buildings as the demographics and the addition to more ELL students has changed.

I provide the readers of this phenomenological study with this information and I am mindful of this as I proceed with this investigation of the phenomenon of principal autonomy as I want to remain as neutral as humanly possible. Creswell (2007) reminds us of the importance of acknowledging these biases in his statement, "In the entire qualitative research process, the researchers keep a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or writers from the literature" (p. 39).



## Chapter 4

### Participants

#### The Participants

The participants in this study bring a variety of experiences as educators and educational leaders. Each individual spoke about the students in his or her school and each brought a unique perspective to the changes the community and school had experienced as a result of the growth in the Hispanic and Latino population. Information regarding each of their experiences was brought forth through a group of questions in the initial phone interview asking participants to share their educational background, how they became a principal and about their current role. Table 2 provides information regarding each of the principal's administrative experiences and demographic information regarding their individual schools.

Table 2

#### *Participant Demographics*

Participant	Years as an Administrator	Number of Years in Current Role	Building Level	Student Enrollment	Hispanic/ Latino Population %	ELL %
Principal 1	12	4	K-5	300	27	21
Principal 2	7	4	K-5	320	40	23
Principal 3	13	5	6-8	825	62	30
Principal 4	16	8	6-8	825	64	15
Principal 5	4	1	6-8	775	32	14

**Principal 1**

Principal 1 did not start off thinking he wanted to be administrator. Instead, he thought he would be a social studies teacher and possibly a coach. He started off early in his career thinking that he wanted to teach junior high or high school teaching social studies and coaching. He went on to pursue a counseling degree and ended up as a counselor in two different states before taking a counseling position in the school he currently serves as principal. While a counselor at his current location, he was heavily influenced by his principal to consider administration. Principal 1 spoke of great admiration of his principal and credited him for helping him reach his current role.

He was always encouraging me to think about being an administrator so I started dabbling in administrative courses and low and behold, it was actually something that I enjoyed, which I thought was amazing because in my head there was no way on God's green Earth- that I was gonna ever gonna wanna be an administrator.

He laughed as he explained how he has now served as the principal for 4 years and in the same building as an administrator for 12 years.

Principal 1 was extremely upbeat and always seemed to be in motion. I was glad I was using a recorder to capture his words as he spoke clearly but faster than I could have ever written his answers to my questions. He was answering phones, looking at his computer screen and asking me questions about my research all in the span of 10 minutes. He was engrossed in the latest data regarding reading scores from the Department of Education on his computer screen, and he was clearly excited about the results of his students. He spoke with great pride about the school and he choked up a bit

as he talked about his staff and students and what the scores represented regarding the work they had done.

The school is an older red-brick building located in the central part of the city. It currently serves 300 elementary students, 80 of who are Hispanic/Latino. Twenty one percent are ELL, almost 4 times the state average and 3 times the district average. Most of the homes directly surrounding the neighborhood are small and worn. The building was hot and humid. The building space was cramped but neatly kept and displayed school pride with pictures, student work and awards. There was a summer school program going on at the time. The principal invited me to join him in a visit to the classroom where the program was being held. The class had approximately 20-25 students, mostly Hispanic, who were smiling and enjoying the activity despite sweat trickling down a few of the students' faces. The activity was led by someone that the principal described as a veteran ELL teacher. She invited me into the classroom to observe the class. The students were cutting out magazine items to represent what they liked.

## **Principal 2**

Principal 2 is entering her fourth year as the Principal of an elementary school in the south central region of the state. She began her teaching career and was an administrator in another state prior to coming to Nebraska. Being an administrator was not her original goal:

I guess I got into administration—it really hasn't always been a goal of mine. I was a teacher in the third district I was working at, and it was a district that had hypergrowth is what they called it then. We built a school every year, a new elementary school every year, and I just was a support there. I had some

experiences that I brought, and just people encouraged me to go into the principalship, so that's how I got started.

Principal 2 was energetic and would take her time in responding to the questions giving me the impression she was thoughtfully responding. Her responses compared much of her current work with work she had previously done in another state. Her office had a long bookcase filled with leadership texts and multiple texts about reading instruction.

When I asked her about the texts she divulged more about her past educational roles.

I taught in a K-8 school where I'd say it was 75 percent Hispanic, a Title I school, a lot of poverty. I taught there for a year, and then moved to another school, and I taught there for about six years, and then three of those years I was an instructional coach, first with literacy and then with math. Then in that same district I became, I was a halftime coach and halftime assistant principal. I was an assistant principal for a year, and then I moved up to be a principal. I was a principal there for two years at that same school, and then come out here and this will be my fourth year at where we have in between 35 to 40 percent Hispanic, about 90 percent free/reduced population.

The building is located towards the southern end of the city. Currently this elementary school houses 320 students. One hundred and twenty of the students are Hispanic/Latino and almost 23% are ELL students. This percentage is 4 times greater than the state average and 3 times greater than the district average. The building appears newer and the surrounding area had smaller homes but appeared well kept. The building offers a lunch program during the summer so the first of the families were beginning to arrive as I completed my interview of Principal 2. The families entering the building were Hispanic and the principal greeted several of the parents in Spanish. The mother of the one family smiled broadly when she saw Principal 2 greeting her at the door and speaking to her and her two children in Spanish.

### Principal 3

Principal 3 has been in an administrative role in his current building for 13 years.

Principal 3 was not shy about sharing his views on education, and he mentioned that sometimes his directness is appreciated, but at other times it puts him on thin ice with district officials. He began as an assistant principal before taking over as the Principal in 2008. He knew early on he wanted to be a Principal even as he began his career as a social studies teacher for a 6-8 school in an adjacent Midwest state:

I have always been in a position of leadership of some sort. My dad owned his own business as I grew up, and so I grew up in the ready-mix concrete business running a concrete plant in the summertime. Then as I transitioned into a professional career, I worked as a store manager and then as I finished up my education degree. I knew that the reason I went into education was I wanted to be a principal, so that's kind of why I chose to do that.

Principal 3 spoke of a defining moment in his career, which he felt helped define why he wanted to continue to be a principal. He clearly wanted to share this experience as he mentioned it a couple of times during the course of the interviews:

There was a huge immigration raid, and we had—I had several, several hundred people within the community that were rounded up, and it had a huge impact on our families here at school. It was one of those watershed type moments where you realize that you are the protector of the kids that are in this building. As that information started to get around that there were raids, our kids started getting very upset, and nervous, and scared. We had to assure them that you know what? In this building, you will be safe. No one's gonna come in here. No one's gonna take you, that in this building, you're safe. That was one of those moments that was kinda of one of those moments because really, we have—the biggest concentrated of Hispanic kids in our district.

The middle school is located on the western edge of the city not far from some of the city's industry. The building itself serves over 825 middle school students with 508 of these students being Hispanic/Latino and 30% being ELL students. This number is 8

percentage points higher than the district average and 5 times the state average. There were large banners hung in the commons area adjacent to the main office in Spanish and English promoting peace and respect. Many items posted on the bulletin boards were in both Spanish and English. The school appeared in excellent condition. Despite 900 plus students in the building the day I visited, it was quiet with no one in the halls other than a custodian. I made a comment to the principal about how quiet it was and he replied laughingly, “Not bad for a building with the worst perception in the city for being a bad school with those kids.”

#### **Principal 4**

Principal 4 has been an administrator in the state for 16 years at 3 schools. He currently is entering his 8<sup>th</sup> year as the principal of a middle school in the northeastern region of the state. Like several other of the principals interviewed for this study, Principal 4 did not set out to be a building leader. He began his career as a middle school teacher and completed a Master’s Degree in Instruction. His future changed when he was approached by an administrator at his school.

They had a Leadership program that was just gonna start that next year. The dean asked me if I would be interested. I didn’t really wanna be a principal. I wanted to be a teacher, but I liked taking the classes, so I signed up to do that. Once I finished my degree, I’m kind of competitive, and then there was an assistant principal job at the school I was at. I applied for that. I loved being where I was, but once I didn’t get that job, I thought, “You know what? This is maybe what I need to do and kind of my calling,” and so started applying at positions and accepted a job in Central Nebraska as the assistant principal.

Principal 4 stayed in the role of an assistant principal for 5 years and then took a job as a principal in another central Nebraska town albeit quite a bit smaller. However, the desire to work in a bigger district with more diversity compelled him to seek a different job.

I was there for four years as the principal and loved it. However, the community was all white. My previous role in the other school there, there, was about maybe 15 percent Hispanic, and that population was growing so I wanted to find a place with more diversity. Then when we came to my present location, we're probably about 55, 60 percent Hispanic. We thought living and working in a diverse setting was a better thing for our kids just 'cause that's the way the world's gonna be. My son and daughter both have kids that are Caucasian and Hispanic and even some African in their classes. It's just been a good thing for our kids.

The middle school serves approximately 825 students of whom 526 students are Hispanic/Latino. Fifteen percent of the students are ELL.

### **Principal 5**

Principal 5 was a teacher and an administrator at heart for as long as she can remember. Principal 5 has always known she wanted to be a teacher and an administrator:

It was always something that—when I graduated from high school, it was something that I desired to do—to teach and then go into administration. Leading is something that seems fairly natural to me, I guess, so that was one of the reasons that I chose that. But I also had the outgoing principal was very influential as well and encouraged me to go to an emerging administrators meeting and just see what it was and see if it was something I was interested in doing. And at the time our Dean of Students went on maternity leave so he hired a sub for my class and I filled in there to just get my feet wet and have been an administrator ever since. I moved from Dean of students to assistant principal and now I am the principal.

Principal 5 was very business like in her approach to answering questions. Her answers were succinct and to the point. She did not spend much time searching for answers. What was clear in interviewing this participant was her knowledge of curriculum and her use of data to help guide decisions. She was more reserved in her passion about students and the school compared to the others I had interviewed but she spoke with much confidence in her curriculum knowledge. Her office was filled with curriculum and instruction texts as

well as leadership books focusing on instructional leadership. She had a great knowledge of how the middle school had evolved over the years as she had been a teacher in the building when the increase of Hispanic students began.

The middle school is centrally located and it serves approximately 775 students with 250 of those students being Hispanic/Latino and 14% ELL, more than double the state average. The building appears to have undergone some expansion, and there was a portable classroom on site. A mixture of small ranch style homes and a few larger two-story homes are around the school building. Some of the homes appear well kept while others are in need of some repair. Two young Hispanic males were sitting on the bike rack by the building as I approached and they politely directed me to the main doors of the building. The interior of the building was cramped and the facility appeared outdated. It was an odd entrance to the building as you moved down a narrow hallway and a set of stairs to the main office.

As I entered the main office, I was greeted by the secretary and another woman. She was in the process of helping this woman, who I assumed was possibly Hispanic by her appearance, obtain permission to log onto a computer. I later learned this woman was the new bilingual dean of students. The principal was simply ecstatic about the new hire and spoke of her with a great deal of enthusiasm as she described her role to me. The police department was conducting a shooter-training on the second floor and occasionally the sounds of blanks being fired could be heard during the interview. The principal remarked, “necessary training but a little unnerving to think what if this happened here.”



## **Chapter 5**

### **Results**

The five principals were interviewed and the researcher analyzed the recorded data to develop themes. The following questions were asked to each of the principals to obtain the necessary data to complete this study.

1. What does it mean to be an effective principal of a building with a growing population of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students?
2. What obstacles currently exist within a Nebraska school district that limit principal's autonomy to be an effective principal as it relates to the changing demographic population?
3. What obstacles to autonomy does the demographic increase of Hispanic/Latino population itself bring which impacts principal's autonomy to be an effective principal?
4. With the increase in the Hispanic student population have there been any external obstacles principals encountered that has impact their autonomy to be a principal?
5. Has principal autonomy increased to lead a building as a result of a growing population of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students?

In order to understand if principals perceived they had the autonomy to lead their building with the increase of Hispanic/Latino/ELL student population, it was necessary for the principals to share their perceptions of what were the necessary qualities of an effective principal.

**Question 1: What qualities are necessary to be an effective principal of a building with a growing population of Hispanic/Latino students?**

The participants identified the following areas as necessary qualities of an effective principal: curriculum and instruction, emphasis on reading, ability to use data and interventions based on that data, ability to communicate with families, and vision.

**Curriculum/Instruction.** Principal 1 was emphatic about maintaining a common curriculum as a necessity to meet the needs of his Hispanic/Latino students. Principal 1 spoke also of the need of requiring staff to use direct and explicit instruction as a necessity for ELL students who might not have the background knowledge to fill the gaps in learning, which some non-ELL students might already have.

It means understanding that common curriculum, common expectations, common goals are essential to meet those students' needs. Our Hispanic students are very mobile within our district and having commonality is essential for their success. We have challenging demographics and our kids need to have that direct and explicit instruction. For my school—my demographics—we have a high number of SPED—relatively high number of ELL kids—and just a really high number of kids who aren't SPED or ELL, but they're bubble kids. They need that direct and explicit instruction. (Principal 1)

Principal 2's office was filled with books about best teaching instruction. As a Title school principal she said she was bombarded by the number of quick-fix teaching programs presented to her by vendors that were designed to help ELL students. But she was also focused on strategies and the fidelity to which sound instructional strategies were used.

The other thing is we really focus on just good instruction, not necessarily programs. Just what does it mean to be a good reader and to write and the importance of reading, writing and thinking?

We observe each other and observe each other instructionally. This year, we're starting instructional rounds, which I'm excited about. We started by

getting some brave few to let me videotape then, and then we'd show it to the staff and we'd use the walk-through form together and we'd discuss it.  
(Principal 2)

Principal 5's response was similar to Principal 2's view on instruction. Principal 5 wanted to ensure the instruction and curriculum implemented would not only have an impact upon Hispanic/ELL students but for all students.

So we are constantly looking at effective teaching strategies that are good for all kids—but they're good for ELL kids too—but all kids. So improving those strategies and making sure that teachers are aware of them and just making them better. Always improving your craft. (Principal 5)

Principal 3's thought on curriculum and instruction were in line with Principal 2 and Principal 5's views. Principal 3, however, seemed more willing to take risks.

You have to be innovative. You need to be willing to take risks to find the best possible curriculum and strategies for not only our diverse students but all students to learn. For example, we continue to grow our sixth grade readers pretty significantly in our building, and I think it's just attributed to just that whole idea of an idea that a staff members has, says, "Here's what I think we could do," and they've got some pretty sound logic behind it. They've done some reading and some research, and so we say, "Let's go forward in it." That's turned out very well for us. But you also need resources to make it happen. You need the resources and support so staff can implement the instruction effectively.  
(Principal 3)

Regardless of the type of curriculum supported at each of the schools—direct instruction within a particular program or overall "best-practice strategies"—all of the principals emphasized the importance of engaging staff in sharing and modeling instructional strategies that could support all students' learning.

**Data within professional learning communities.** To a person the participants all expressed the need to be adept in collecting, analyzing and acting on data. All of the participants' schools use Professional Learning Communities or PLC's as a method for

sharing and using data. As Bolster and Henley (2005) outline, PLC's are designed to create dynamic learning communities:

PLCs are small groups of teachers (3-5) working together on a regular basis for learning, joint planning, and problem solving. PLCs can be organized by grade levels, multiple grade levels, departments, or interdisciplinary groups. The members of each group interact with each other and depend upon each other for the accomplishment of specific goals. The group stays together long enough to form habits and conventions. An effective learning community cultivates an attitude of inquiry and focuses attention on student thinking and understanding. (p. 1)

All of the principals interviewed for this study emphasized the importance of PLCs in their schools for analyzing and using data to support students' learning:

What they taught us how to do in our PLC's, is to look at our DIBELS data and then make instructional changes based on that data with regards to reading. Obviously starting at the very basic components of reading like letter and sound recognition and that phonemic awareness and then moving on to fluency and then to comprehension. (Principal 1)

While Principal 1 emphasizes the PLC as a way to endorse direct instruction, Principal 2 focuses more on the value of the PLC itself regardless of the curricular approach:

I'm still figuring out the curriculum, but they're gonna pass, most of them, just because they have supports, they have background knowledge. Whereas, when you're at a Title I school or a lot of poverty, you really have to be looking at your data and really adjusting instruction. We use PLC's and stay true to the PLC process. (Principal 2)

Principal 4 and Principal 5 spoke not only of the value of the PLC process but also highlighted some of the successes their schools have experienced by implementing PLC's:

As a district we feel that PLCs in collaboration is what's best for them and we've created smart goals. I think of our Language Arts Department and we're starting to train all of our teachers with explicit instruction—and the Language Arts Department created their smart goal and as a department they decided some specific vocabulary instruction pieces that they were going to use and they said

that you have to have these components—and every time you teach a vocabulary word, these components have to be involved. And we saw a lot of success. In fact, this year our 7th grade students, including ELL and SPED, were 88 percent proficient on their reading test—which is pretty profound. (Principal 5)

Like Principal 5, Principal 4 emphasized the value of looking closely at data to identify needs of student sub-groups:

I think that you have to understand how to disaggregate data and use that data to specifically focus on interventions for all subgroups of students. We made some drastic, significant pushes in that area. We had started doing the PLC process, and we have—I'm not gonna say we perfected it, 'cause we haven't, but it is amazing—our PLCs and what they've turned into—over the last four years. Last year, our eighth-grade math in the NeSA made 20-point gain. It was unbelievable, and most of our PLCs—most of our grade level, whether it was reading or language arts or math—made somewhere between 9 and 20 point gains. We celebrated this year, but I really think that—I told them we weren't celebrating the gains we were making. We were celebrating the hard work and the effective PLCs, because we were doing item analysis on essays after each assessment they did. Our teachers just jumped on board, and they saw that we were gonna look by student, by standard, how these kids were doing and what they were doing. (Principal 4)

Several of the participants not only discussed the use of PLC's but also highlighted the need for resources to enact interventions based on the findings from the data.

You really have to be looking at your data and really adjusting instruction and have a strong intervention system and a strong RTI system in place and the people and dollars to make it happen. I mean, to make the improvements that need to happen. (Principal 4)

Principal 2's response echoed Principal 4's almost word for word in terms of noting the importance of a strong RTI system:

You need to have a good RTI program in place. Our RTI system is really—there was always an RTI system here, but it just has become very strong the last couple years. We have invested a lot in our intervention programming. (Principal 2)

While Principal 3 and Principal 5 were less focused on using the language of RTI, they both also underscored that resources are critical to using PLC's effectively. Principal 3 stated

Knowing about data is critical. What does your data tell you and how do you collect, analyze and make decisions on what you modify, build upon or blow up based on the data. Knowing what resources do you have in place or what resources you need are critical.

Principal 5 said "We're trying to do more co-teaching for our students based on our demographics and what we are learning from the data—resources are critical to make this happen."

While the participants identified with several of the characteristics outlined by Lunenburg (2010, p. 122) the participants also identified other areas principals with a large percentage of Hispanic/Latino students must develop expertise in if they are going to be effective principals. Two areas these participants highlighted were developing expertise in reading/language development and effective communication with students and families.

**Reading/Language development.** Principal 1 was amazed at how much he had learned about reading as the principal of a building with a growing number of Hispanic/ELL students. His thoughts were echoed in the other participants' responses as well. The focus on the importance of understanding reading development far outweighed any other theme found from analyzing the data with regard to the question of being an effective principal of a building with an increased number of Hispanic/ELL student population.

Principal 1 noted that current research emphasizes the centrality of reading to students' overall school success:

You have to understand reading. To be an administrator gives me an opportunity to hopefully get these students out of our building reading at benchmark. There's a lot of studies that show if students aren't reading at grade-level by third grade, the chances of them being successful really start to diminish. I have learned quite a bit over the last two, three years with regards to reading. One of the most profound things I think for us has been participating in Project Readers. (Principal 1)

Similarly, Principal 3 said that administrators and staff must be vigilant about focusing on reading even when students are making gains:

You need to know about how students acquire language and be able to help staff understand that while they can see students making gains these are students who will constantly need to focus on reading. And then celebrate those gains to help staff and students recognize they are making progress. (Principal 3)

Principal 4 noted that ELL students especially require teachers to consistently practice best approaches to reading instruction:

They (teachers) always need to cognizant of the fact this is a second language. Sometimes students look like and sound like they are reading at grade level when in fact they are still acquiring the language. It requires teachers to know how to consistently teach vocabulary and always practice best methods of teaching and learning especially for reading. (Principal 4)

Like Principal 4, Principal 2 noted the importance of teacher consistency in modeling reading strategies for ELL students:

You have to understand the language development of ELL students and the gaps in learning they present. We purchased Saxon Phonics this year, and this is after looking at our reading scores for the—for two years, we've been looking at scores, and we've been trying to do some other things, and we piloted some stuff, some strategies last year that really worked with an intervention group of kids by providing that explicit phonetics instruction. We all had to get on the same page and how we're pronouncing our letters. (Principal 2)

Principal 5 had earlier stated how her Language Arts teachers had focused on reading comprehension in their PLC group and had learned about data and strategies to increase student achievement in the area of reading.

In sum, the participants identified knowledge of reading practices as being imperative to being an effective principal of a school with a growing population of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students.

**Communication with families and students.** Participants also identified the theme of communication as a critical component to being an effective principal of a building with an increase in Hispanic/ELL demographics. For the participants the communication piece often requires more effort and time than those principals working with a more homogeneous population. Principal 1, Principal 2, and Principal 5 all spoke to the need to effectively communicate and the efforts required.

You try to accommodate those families. You do things to help educate the families. This year, because of AYP, we're working on, and we've scheduled family literacy nights for the first semester. When we do like our open house and we will do our literacy nights—when we do school-type of functions, we do a lot of different things. Some of my colleagues without English speaking families take for granted how much time and energy this takes. We have homes where mom and dad don't speak English; that's a lot. We utilize—like our ELL teachers. Our ELL teachers are bilingual. Our paras and ELL are bilingual—most of 'em are—and we utilize interpreters from the district to reach out to our families when we have family nights, parent/teacher conferences—whatever we've got going on. There's always gonna be people here that have the ability to speak Spanish.  
(Principal 1)

Principal 2 also spoke to the importance of addressing communication issues so that parents who do not speak English are centrally involved:

A lot of the parents don't speak English, so we gotta find other ways for them to be involved because but they wanna be involved. I started a parent group when we first came here. There never was one. You have to teach them a lot. I had to



teach them how to have a meeting and how to get along with each other and put forth the extra time and effort to make it happen. (Principal 2)

Principal 5 echoed Principal 2's comments, noting that her own relationships with students and their families have been limited at times because she cannot communicate effectively with them:

I think one of the biggest impacts is communication. I think that we have had to—we always have to be cognizant of the fact that we want to make sure that we're communicating with all parents. And when some of your parents don't speak English, you have to make adjustments for that so that you can make that communication. This takes a lot of time and effort. More direct communication is even better. This year my Dean of Students that I just hired is actually bilingual and I'm very excited...too because I look at all of the students that I was not able to call when I had a referral, and then I compare those to the students that the parents I called frequently—and the relationships I was able to build with them that I couldn't build with the ones that I couldn't speak to. I had an interpreter call, but it's very different when it's coming second hand versus from me. So I think that communication is a huge thing. (Principal 5)

Principal 3 also was well aware of the need to effectively communicate and spoke of using another resource in the community to aid him with communicating with families and students. Principal 3 spoke passionately about the Hispanic gentleman who has served as the liaison between the school and the community. Principal 3 was concerned about what will happen to this type of communication when this individual retires and how he will replace him.

Communicating with families is absolutely essential and I'm gonna have some difficulty communicating with families when my bilingual at-risk coordinator retires. With him here I've really not had a whole lot of problem with communication. We have two translators in our building, and we also have—the position is called the multicultural-at-risk coordinator, and it's a gentleman who is in the Hispanic community, is probably as revered and trusted as any individual there could be. I affectionately call him the Forrest Gump of life because he is as Hispanic as you could be and as American as you can be at the same time, and really the guy has done come of the most amazing things you'll ever see. I've been very fortunate cuz he's a great reader and writer of Spanish. He translates

superbly, so when he is gone, I will definitely then have a void that I probably haven't had and that most people don't have the opportunity to have in their community is someone of that stature who's been such a gift to us. (Principal 3)

Each participant spoke about the importance of communicating but each acknowledged the time and effort they needed to use to reach out to the families who spoke limited English or no English.

**Vision/Belief.** To effectively lead a school with changing demographics, all of the participants spoke of the need for a vision and belief in the students they serve. From these interviews I was reminded of Sergiovanni's (2000) writing regarding leadership.

Authentic leaders anchor their practice in ideas, values and commitments, exhibit distinctive qualities of style and substance, and can be trusted to be morally diligent in advancing the enterprises they lead. Authentic leaders, in other words, display character, and character is the defining characteristic of leadership. (p. 17)

The participants displayed a passion about their beliefs about their students and the vision they held for their futures. There was a fierceness in their convictions to making sure their students succeed in education. Principal 4 noted the importance of conveying this conviction to all the school's stakeholders:

You have to be an effective communicator with your staff, students, and parents to set high expectations for students, teachers, and parents. Communicate to teachers that all students can achieve at high levels and that the language barriers will be overcome. You have to look for success often and celebrate those successes, and keep your eyes always looking forward. (Principal 4)

Principal 5 also noted the importance of conveying a strong vision and building relationships with students, staff, and community members based on that vision:

I think you have to have a strong leader with some strong vision to where the school is going. You have to have a way to create a positive school culture and move the entire school in a positive direction to reach those goals. Relationships are key to reaching that vision. As an administrator, everything else controls your day and I think sometimes you can get to the end of the day and you may have

had five things on your to-do list but all of the people within your building needed things first. So I think that you've always gotta put the people first and you have to remember when you get done, that is your job. It's not just the paperwork piece. But it's the piece that is the most unpredictable that you never know how long it's going to take or what it's going to entail. But that's the piece that's the most important. And it's building those relationships that you've got to have—strong relationships with the teachers, the students, the parents, district employees, etc. (Principal 5)

Principal 1's understanding of vision is predicated on the long-term consequences for the communities of the students he serves:

As an administer I think you can change some things up to hopefully make some changes to improve the situation of students and that all trickles down the road. I mean if we can improve the situation of students here, we can improve the situation of our neighborhood and our community. It does have an impact. As I was sayin', there was a time maybe four or five years ago when 30 to 40 percent of these kids were walking out of the school at the beginning of summer reading at grade-level. That's difficult. If three out of ten kids or four out of ten kids are walking outta here at the end of 5<sup>th</sup> grade and they can't read at their grade-level, it's gonna have a major impact. It's gonna have a major impact on their lives. It'll have an impact on their families, their neighborhood—their community on down the road. (Principal 1)

Rather than focusing on particular curricular goals, Principal 1's vision is focused on his students' self concepts and confidence levels:

You have to have a vision and stick to it. My vision for my students is that they're confident and that they ask questions and they become thinkers and writers and the confidence, that they have confidence to go to college and be whatever they wanna be. We take that Gallup survey every year, and our kids are pretty hopeful. (Principal 1)

From their responses each of the participants had and shared a vision for their respective schools. The natural next question asked by the researcher was if the participants had the autonomy to make their vision for their school a reality.

**Question 2: “What obstacles currently exist which limit your autonomy to be an effective principal within your district as it relates to the changing demographic population?”**

The participants shared two overriding concerns related to lack of autonomy when asked this question: decision-making authority over budgets and staffing.

I have no authority over the budget. Used to in the past, but now it goes all through a director, and they’ll make the decision. I have no authority to send people to conferences. That all has to go through a director. Last year, I got in trouble [laughter] because I had bought a couple—I don’t remember—computer programs for an ESL teacher. I don’t even remember. It was something just really small, and I remember talking to our finance director, and he said, “You don’t have that budget item.” I said, “Yeah, I know. I just coded it something else.” He said, “Well, you can’t do that.” I just said, “Why can’t I?” “Everything’s gotta go through—technology has to go through the technology director.”  
(Principal 4)

Principal 3 also noted that he does not have autonomy in determining how money can be spent to address curricular needs that his teachers identify:

We don’t have much say in how we spend money on curriculum. I want to get a new science series, it’s a great series, and it comes in some very readability pieces—some great readability for our new ELLs, but we’ve talked about the possibility of bringing that curriculum because they have a set for science, as well, and our teacher’s pretty adamant that she needs the science materials. We continue to bring that to the district and say, “Hey, here’s something that we think is kind of important. We really need to think about getting some materials for science cuz we really don’t—we’re trying to teach science, and we don’t have the materials for it.” We can’t seem to get any movement on that for science.  
(Principal 3)

Principal 2 noted that because of her school’s Title One status, she has much less autonomy over her budget than at her previous institution.

I am limited by control over my Title I budget. In my last district, it was all up to me. I had to write that school improvement plan, and I had to show 10 percent was going to professional development and things like that. I had that autonomy, I guess, to do—as long as it was approved by our district level, to do whatever

kind of professional development, depending on what our needs were. Here, it's not site-based, it's at a district level, so it's district wide, which is tough because there's no other school in the district like mine. That's tough. I'd rather have school-based, of course. (Principal 2)

For these principals, there is a tension between site-based accountability for student performance versus district-wide decision-making for curriculum and professional development budgets. This lack of autonomy is particularly challenging when attempting to make site-based decisions to support the changing demographic student needs in their schools.

**Staffing.** In addition to curriculum and professional development, the participants identified that their autonomy has decreased with regard to decision-making on staff. Principal 3 wryly noted that his autonomy in hiring staff has disappeared as the Hispanic/Latino/ELL population has increased. He expressed that as districts became accountable for the performance of student subgroups, these students now matter in the eyes of the district. In turn, the district has begun to exert more control over staffing decisions.

It's funny the answer to that question on staffing because my first ten years here, any ELL position we had, I would interview for it on my own, and I would hire it on my own. In the last few years, that has been taken away. The scores of my kids now matter and the district thinks they can hire better people. All of the teachers are hired at the district level. We don't even participate in the interviews are assigned to our building." Like I said, I have one very brand new ELL teacher and that was one of those people that I've just never met before. In fact, until she showed up on Monday to our new teacher—yesterday was the first day for new teachers, and at noon principals got 'em for half a day, and we take 'em out to lunch. I hadn't met her until that point. She hadn't come in. I'd never seen her, so I had no idea. She walked up to me and said, "Hi," and I'm like, "Hi," and I'm trying to figure out who she is. Finally, I see a name tag that tells me, "Oh, you must be Nicole." That's frustrating. (Principal 3)

Principal 2 also has been limited in her control of staffing—due to politics of the district and the community—to enact the changes she sees necessary. As opposed to having the autonomy to make decisions, she instead sees herself navigating through the politics.

I know a lot of it (Title Budget) goes towards people, and so you get into that, I mean, then you get into the politics of it. Well, politically, it wouldn't look good for me to get rid of three paras to save money to buy a program. Is that politically the right thing to do? Probably not, especially here where maybe jobs are harder to find. Would that be what's best for kids? Yes the program would help more than the paras. That's a super honest answer. (Principal 2)

Principal 4 and Principal 5 both said that their autonomy is impacted in terms of not having enough resources to implement the interventions needed to impact student achievement for ELL students. This lack of resources also increases class sizes and then impacts the level of instruction needed to help students.

Our kids here, our NeSA scores in ESL are not very good. They're still low, and we have 800 and about 80 kids in this building, and I have two—a newcomer teacher and another ESL teacher and another one for three periods, and so we have really two teachers and a third that are helping with our ESL population. It's not enough resources. I think sometimes that is just a really big frustration, and I'm not the only principal that probably gets it. The elementaries are in the same boat. They probably have less resources than we do, and the high school is in that same boat as well. (Principal 4)

Principal 4's frustration with his lack of autonomy to determine how to staff his building is especially related to pressures to meet needs of diverse learners without compromising class sizes for the overall student population.

I know that they (the district) are very focused on, "We need to make sure we have a budget and stay within our budget," and they need to, but those are the people I see as—that are losing is our small, diverse populations, staff to work with them, translators to hire to hopefully help us communicate with parents. It's gonna be hard to impact—then I have to try to make small class sizes to try to do almost one-on-one to one-to-two to one-to-three tutoring in reading, and then my

other class sizes may go up. It's just that whole thing. What's your class numbers, and why is my class so big, and why do you need this person to just work with these two or three kids? It's just like if you want us to make gains by student by standard, this is what we have to do. (Principal 4)

Principal 1 recognizes the mobility factor and the impact it has on decision-making in hiring. Typically Principal 1 has more students who move into the community late but he is only staffed for the students who are currently registered.

I'm at a bubble point right now with kindergarten where I have 50 kids who are registered. I don't know what's gonna show up. I don't know if all 50 are coming. I would guess that somewhere out in this part of town, there's probably five to ten kids who are not on our radar. They're not in preschool. They're not in daycares. We get a lot of our information from them. They're probably out there. I'm in panic mode. This happens every year. Honestly, that's the one thing. I'll sit there and lay in bed and think staffing. "I hope there's a kindergarten teacher out there somewhere." Or, "I hope there's a 2nd grade teacher, just in case." I don't have autonomy in that. (Principal 1)

For these principals, autonomy in staffing—determining what type of staff needs to be hired and who is ultimately hired to fill such needs—is critical to addressing the changing demographics of their schools. The participants all suggested that the lack of autonomy to make staffing decisions negatively impacts their abilities to lead as principals.

**Question 3: What obstacles to autonomy does the demographic increase of Hispanic/Latino population itself bring which impacts your autonomy to be an effective principal?**

Two themes emerged from this question. The first theme is unique as principals stated that communication with parents/students was an essential factor in a school with increased demographics of Hispanic/Latino students. However, the inability to consistently and effectively communicate was a barrier to the principal's autonomy. The

second theme, which developed from this question, was student poverty has a large impact on the principal's autonomy to lead.

**Language barrier.** The principals saw their autonomy limited by the difficulty they have in communicating with families. The inability to quickly give parents information or to enlist the help of parents to help with their students makes it difficult for the principals to enact changes and thus limits their autonomy. Principal 5 identified several ways that communication with families limits autonomy, including students who cannot or do not communicate to their parents about their school experiences, school events that do not feel inclusive, and teachers who are reluctant to call parents:

I think for one, the students sometimes don't always communicate with their parents. The students may speak English all day in school and may then go home and really not tell their parents much. Notes that come home in their agenda perhaps they write their assignments—they write them all in English but their parents can't read that. So I think that it makes it difficult for parents that—the student probably can speak both languages but maybe they predominantly when they're in school write in English. The parents can't help them at home. So I think that academically it does hurt them a lot because it makes it very challenging—makes it very difficult for them to help them and for us to assist them. I think just getting them into the building is difficult because they're not as comfortable coming in when we have—just getting them to come to parent/teacher conferences and being able to then communicate directly with them—those all pose challenges because they don't communicate. I think that the challenge of calling home is challenging. It's difficult enough for teachers to call home, and they don't do it enough. But when it's a parent that they can't speak to, they don't do it hardly at all. That's the biggest challenge because teachers just don't call home enough and then when it's a bigger hurdle, it just doesn't always happen. We have only one of each. (Principal 5)

Principal 1 described several ways that his school seeks to overcome such barriers, noting that the time and effort required to communicate effectively can be challenging:

You try to accommodate those families. You do things to help educate the families. This year, because of AYP, we're working on, and we've scheduled family literacy nights for the first semester. When we do like our open house and



we will do our literacy nights—when we do school-type of functions, we do a lot of different things.

We have homes where mom and dad don't speak English. That's a lot of time and effort to coordinate those events and information. It takes time to have things translated. (Principal 1)

Principal 5, Principal 3 and Principal 4 further demonstrated the impact of the language barrier on their ability to lead by not being able to find qualified speakers of the language. It is difficult to capture solely in their words the frustration on their faces and in their voices when they identified the lack of candidates to help them communicate with families and students.

In my building, we have two paras who are bilingual because they work with each ELL teacher. Each building typically has one person, but when you're hiring people for maybe a secretary position, you just really—we don't have a lot of candidates that apply that have that ability—that are bilingual and have all the other characteristics that you want or skills that you want. So we lack the people that are qualified in that position that are bilingual. (Principal 5)

Principal 3 also noted that the lack of bilingual candidates for school staff contributes to ongoing communication challenges.

I do not get—I have gotten zero applications of bilingual teachers in my 13 years here. Yeah, even our kids who've gone on to college and become teachers who I know are great and fluent in Spanish, I'm like, "Hey, you get that degree, come on back. I'll find a place for you." They end up down in Texas, or California, or places like that. (Principal 3)

Principal 4 noted that in addition to Spanish speakers, students who speak other languages are further complicating his school's ability to communicate with families.

Our ESL and our newcomers program used to be just Hispanics. We had people that could speak Spanish and translate and do those kind of things. Now, we have people that are speaking different languages that we don't even have translators to help translate that. Now, we're meeting with parents who might have kids translating if they can. Sometimes, we have a tough time even communicating with families because we don't have someone that can speak that language. (Principal 4)

While Principal 2 is able to communicate in Spanish with her students and families, she noted that communication remains a challenge because few of her staff can communicate similarly.

Myself and my para are the only two people that speak Spanish here and I'm not used to—most of my staff in my last district, well I say half of my staff in my last district spoke Spanish. Here, there's not really, not as much, so that's been difficult, only having two people. It's been difficult, my front office staff not speaking Spanish. (Principal 2)

Principal 2 highlights one additional complication of finding qualified people to use as translators. The communities where families are from dictates how Spanish is spoken and thus requires precise interpretation.

I'm used to most everyone being Mexican, so you speak Spanish, everyone speaks that certain type of Spanish. Here you have people from Cuba, Guatemala, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and so you really have to speak the proper Spanish because one certain word can mean something in one and mean totally opposite being with another group. (Principal 2)

The difficulty of not being able to translate the language is compounded when family members of Hispanic/Latino students are not able to advocate for their schools to the district officials who make the decisions. This communication barrier doesn't allow for the same influence on officials and impacts the principal's autonomy to help influence needed change.

Then you also have to think, a lot of these parents aren't gonna be the ones at board meetings. That's too bad because board meetings, they aren't in Spanish, nothing's provided in Spanish so parents wouldn't have the information to support something for our school. I don't have the parents who put pressure on the board for change when needed. That's I guess one of the things I guess I don't feel supported at district level is, a lot of stuff that goes home isn't in Spanish. (Principal 2)

In sum, communication barriers impact principals' autonomy in several directions—both in direct communication with students and parents but also in terms of advocacy for their schools to external constituencies.

**Poverty/Mobility.** The participants' reflections regarding the theme of poverty matches the current research. More Latino children are living in poverty—6.1 million in 2010—than children of any other racial or ethnic group. This statistic marks the first time in U.S. history that the single largest group of poor children is not white. In 2010, 37.3% of poor children were Latino, 30.5% were white and 26.6% were black, according to an analysis of new data from the U.S. Census Bureau by the Pew Hispanic Center (Passell & Cohn, 2008), a project of the Pew Research Center. Never before has a minority group made up so large a share of the nation's youth. A new national survey finds that Latinos ages 16 to 25 are satisfied with their lives and optimistic about their futures. They value education, hard work, and career success. But they are more likely than other youth to drop out of school, live in poverty and become teen parents. They also have high levels of exposure to gangs. The impact of poverty on teen parents can be especially detrimental to their children.

In addition very young children require healthy learning and exploration for optimal brain development. Unfortunately, in impoverished families there tends to be a higher prevalence of such adverse factors as teen motherhood, depression, and inadequate health care, all of which lead to decreased sensitivity toward the infant (van Ijzendoorn et al., 2004) and, later, poor school performance and behavior on the child's part.

The high poverty levels of children in the participants' schools impacts their ability to contribute funds compared to students from wealthier families. Due to the higher rate of

poverty of the Hispanic/Latino families at Principal 1's school, for instance, he is not able to bridge resource gaps by school fundraisers as is the case with the wealthier schools.

A lot of these parents are poverty frame of mind whereas the wealthier school here, they have parent groups that have tons of parents. Moms aren't working and they have even CDs for their money and here, do you know what I'm saying? In terms of a fundraiser, I think about this, that kids at a wealthier school, they have their aunts and uncles are doctors and lawyers and all these people that they can sell more to. My kids, half of them don't work or are getting government assistance. Now, those schools have more money to work with than I do, which that's not very fair. (Principal 1)

Principal 5 sees the generational poverty associated with many of her ELL families impacting how her students socialize. Unfortunately their poverty status often places the students in dangerous situations and leads many to gang involvement.

I think poverty is probably a bigger issue than culture sometimes. It presents quite a few issues. It presents the issue with even their dress—they look at that and you don't want kids to judge each other by those things, but they do at times. I think some of their actions are based on things—it's based on merely coming from a family of poverty. I think that sometimes entertainment ranks higher than other things and that trickles down to kids as well and some of their work habits may be created from living in a family of poverty—generational poverty—and they just, the way that they perceive things is different sometimes. We have between 40 and 50 percent free and reduced lunch, so we have a very high poverty rate here. We have a number of students who are in the ELL population, they live in the lowest poverty, they live in a trailer park and they get involved in gangs. (Principal 5)

Principal 4's experiences with students of poverty closely tie with research done regarding the chronic stress of poverty on families and education. Socioeconomic status correlates positively with good parenting, which, research has found, improves academic achievement (DeGarmo, Forgatch, & Martinez, 1999).

Unfortunately, the converse is also true: the chronic stress of poverty impairs parenting skills, and disengaged or negative parenting in turn impairs children's school performance. Parents who are struggling just to stay afloat tend to work extra hours, odd shifts, or multiple jobs and are less able to provide attention and

affection and to devote their time, energy, and resources to their children. These deficits have been associated with higher levels of externalizing behaviors and poor academic performance on children's part. (Jensen, 2009)

The lack of autonomy that principals have in funding and hiring staff can be especially significant in a school with high poverty rates. Not having staff equipped to deal with the complex factors that often accompany students in poverty can further impact student achievement.

I think sometimes the things that—interfere with my autonomy it's—I wouldn't say it's as much about diversity. I think we're about 83 or 84 percent free and reduced lunch, and those things are the things that probably catch my eye more than diversity with race. Some of the things—some of the places that some of our kids live and our families live with 15, 16 people in a house. These families of poverty need a lot of care. Counseling is a huge issue. We had a social worker a couple years ago. We had a lot more—social workers and a lot more coordinators. Then when we had some budget cuts, those positions all got eliminated. Now, we did add an additional counselor several years ago, and we kinda fought to keep that. That's been a good thing, but yeah. We have a lot of situations with social workers. HHS is our speed-dial of our counselors' phones, and we have a lot of kids that receive outside counseling and could use some more outside counseling that come in this building, and we don't have the resources like we used to about four or five years ago. (Principal 4)

Principal 4's lack of autonomy to allocate resources for staffing contributes to additional stress on counselors to meet the complex issues that face students who live in poverty.

For Principal 3 trying to keep students on track with learning and assessing their skills is complicated by the mobile nature of the Hispanic/Latino families he serves.

Many families move for work to try to make a living or do not have the money to remain in the same housing.

Families move around a lot here sometimes for work and sometimes for other reasons. You have a certain window, and they put that window right in kind of a migrating season, so to speak. We have so many of our families who end up taking these trips to Mexico, or Guatemala, or Honduras, depending on wherever they're from. They're gone for the entire testing window. I think that's one of

those things that probably has, terms of working with our ELL population, that has some impact because even though we know they're gonna be gone, and they're gone, and we try to prepare for—prepare that part of it as much as we can, we still can't make up for just the whole gap in their learning that they have because they take these yearly trips out of the country to work. Understanding how that piece plays in is probably kinda important and kind of difficult to deal with sometimes because they say they want their kids to get a good education, yet they take 'em out of some of the prime learning of the year. (Principal 3)

Principal 2 identified poverty as a major factor as well and she addressed mental health as one of the factors as a difficult challenge her students bring to school. This perspective is aligned with the research done by Eric Jensen (2009) and his work with brain research. Children raised in poverty rarely choose to behave differently, but they are faced daily with overwhelming challenges that affluent children never have to confront, and their brains have adapted to suboptimal conditions in ways that undermine good school performance (Jensen, 2009).

Principal 2 noted that her students' poverty leads not only to reduced educational preparedness but also to increased mental health issues.

We spend a lot of time creating interventions for these students. With the poverty there is also more mental health issues. There's a lot more kids that are medicated here. I'm not used to that much, so many kids being on medicines for things, that was different dealing with. (Principal 2)

Principal 1, who was adamant about having knowledge of reading to be an effective principal of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students, noted the challenges that poverty and mobility bring to reading achievement.

There's the mobility factor, which is a huge challenge. These kids are dealing with all of these other things. I mean, all kids have a bunch of stuff they're dealing with, but I mean, all the research where they come in and they already know what, 20,000 less words than students similar to their age. I just think the lack of background knowledge and the mobility rate is difficult. (Principal 1)

Poverty of students impacts the autonomy of the principals in many ways: raising money, providing resources to deal with students' mental health issues, and the lack of resources to fund more intensive academic interventions for students, which further hinders their academic development. Trying to overcome poverty for all races is a challenge but the high rate of poverty among Hispanic/Latino families places a great deal of pressure on principals' abilities to lead. An example of the obstacles principals face can be seen in the participants' responses to the following question.

**Question 4: With the increase in the Hispanic student population have there been any external obstacles you have encountered which have impacted your autonomy to be a principal?**

Participants described the negative perceptions of the schools they lead on the part of the community and even within their district as impediments to their autonomy to lead their schools. These perceptions impacted the participants' ability to prevent students from attending their school. The negative perceptions experienced by the principals are, unfortunately, in line with other research findings. These negative perceptions have an impact on the educational attainment of Hispanic/Latino students, especially ELL learners, and thus ultimately impact the autonomy of principals of these schools:

Societal attitudes about English language learners and the educational programs that serve them have become increasingly negative in the US over the past decade. The attitudes and practices of schools, communities and society dramatically control the opportunities for success among various populations of students. If a society or community does not embrace its linguistically diverse citizens, it is probable that the schools and many of the teachers in that community will not embrace them, either, detrimentally impacting the quality of education these students receive (Walker, Shafer, & Iiams, 2004, p.137).

Principal 3's reflection on his experience was quite telling about the negative perceptions towards the Hispanic/Latino/ELL students in his community. Principal 3 was visibly frustrated when he spoke about the negative perceptions impacting his students and families.

Dealing with all the negative stereotypes impacts us. I always have to defend this school. It is incredible, but that perception that this is the toughest school in town and that their kids misbehave the most is certainly not the reality, but that perception still exists.

Principal 3 noted there lies a discrepancy between how the town likes to portray its cultural acceptance and the reality his Hispanic/Latino student and families face.

There is specifically two different towns. You'll find the nice little downtown with all the old buildings, and you can go follow that clear up into—out to the mall and everything like that. If you go across to a different part of town, you'll see an entirely different town that's entirely Hispanic and entirely cultural, and those folks stick to their side of the downtown and the white people stick to their side. We like to say we're the racially understanding and passionate city, but the old part of town isn't particularly excited about the way this place looks now. There's not a love affair between the two parts of the community, that's for sure. It affects us a lot with our one feeder school that's kind of mostly white and affluent, they try to either send their kids to the Catholic school, or they try to get their kids in over at the predominately white school. It is kind of a white flight kinda deal. (Principal 3)

Principal 2 has similar negative perceptions to battle as a principal; however, she feels a lack of ability to influence outcomes on a larger scale due to board members who are focused on schools where their children attend and not as focused on the needs of Principal 2's building.

I guess this school has always been viewed negatively in terms of—before I guess, “It's where all the bad kids are or it's where all the Hispanic people are or I don't want my kids going there?” It does have a negative—I do hear some negative things. Not as much anymore as when I first started, but I think it'll always just have—it'll be, “It's the poor kids.” In terms of impacting my autonomy I don't have as much influence, sometimes politically when it comes to



school board, I don't think I do because you have school board members where their kids are not attending this school. (Principal 2)

Principal 5's experience with the negative perception in her community is reinforced by what researchers found when studying Nebraskan's reactions to the growth of Hispanic and Latino families in their communities. Consider these findings from Vogt, Cantrell, Carranza, Johnson, and Tomkins (2006) from their research study *Perceptions of Latin American Immigration Among Rural Nebraskans 2006 Nebraska Rural Poll Results*:

- Approximately one-half of rural Nebraskans do not see immigration from Latin America as being positive for rural Nebraska.
- Fifty-six percent *disagree* with the statement that in general, immigration from Latin America has been good for rural Nebraska. Fourteen percent agree with the statement. Similarly, one-half (50%) *disagree* with the statement that immigrants from Latin America strengthen rural Nebraska. (p. 2)
- Over one-third (38%) of rural Nebraskans agree with the statement that immigrants from Latin America are often discriminated against in rural Nebraska. (p. 3)
- Over two-thirds (69%) disagree with the statement that rural Nebraska communities should communicate important information in Spanish as well as English. (p. 5)
- Over one-half of Latino respondents say these immigrants are often discriminated against in rural Nebraska. (p. 13)

These findings mirror the community perceptions that the principals in this study identified as obstacles to their work. Principal 5 described negative perceptions of her students as an issue when the community voted for a bond issue to fund a new school.

I think some peoples' perception of our students is an obstacle. I think when we did our bond issue, I think that for some people the bond—they didn't want to pass the bond because they didn't want to build it for, in their words, those kids. They thought we were having to build a new building because of our overcrowding because we've had an increase in Hispanics. And it's like, they're not "those kids," they're "our kids." We're building a new building because we need one for the future generation. But I believe that there is some animosity with

some in the community. I've seen it with some students—kids aren't born racist—they get those opinions from adults that they've been around. I haven't seen a lot, but I have seen some where I've talked to a kid and they'll say something that's very racially—it's very racist and I'll talk to them and I'll ask them where they—where'd you hear this? And they'll say grandpa or dad or—so I know that those opinions are out there—the negative opinions towards the Hispanics. We had—at one of our board meetings there was a man that continued to come to every board meeting and he was very against the bond issue and he continued to bring it up and he even came to our building and it was very apparent that he didn't want to build the building for “those people.” (Principal 5)

Community members' perceptions are not the only perceptions that present an obstacle for principals. Several participants noted that lack of understanding among staff also presents barriers. There is an increased likelihood that teacher attitudes regarding English language learners in mainstream classrooms will significantly deteriorate over the next several years. The reasons for this are several: (a) the number of language-minority speakers in the US continues to grow; (b) teachers across the nation are significantly lacking in training for how to educate ELLs in the mainstream classroom; (c) immigrants and refugees are settling in less populated areas with little experience in linguistic and cultural diversity, overwhelming schools and teachers in these regions; and (d) recent changes in federal legislation are stringently holding schools and teachers accountable for the academic achievement of English language learners, which may result in a backlash against the very students the legislation is supposed to help (Walker et al., 2004, p. 132). Principal 2 experienced negative attitudes of staff in her building when she first became principal.

The negative view even by some in this district one at one point in this building make it a challenge at times. I mean, one thing I did come into, I remember my first year here is we had a little girl, a fourth grader, come up to me and said, “Why aren't we allowed to speak Spanish at school?” I asked her, “Well, who said that?” She said, “Well, one of the teachers, they don't let us speak Spanish.”

I started looking into it more and then we had that discussion as a school, and we just talked about, it's important to keep their language. That's a huge plus for these kids to be bilingual. Then we talked about it, it is staff appropriate in appropriate places, and then we started talking to the kids. Now, the kids were happier and they were allowed to speak Spanish. I just didn't realize that some of the kids thought they were gonna get in trouble if they spoke Spanish at school, and I just definitely didn't want that. (Principal 2)

Principal 1 sees the negative perceptions within his district at the board level. He said that he has experienced negative reactions even when his students perform well.

I don't get to have as much influence over the board as some do. Sometimes school board members will go to the place where they feel comfortable. They'll go to where their kids are. They know the teachers and stuff and ask for feedback where I don't have board members coming in asking what these kids need. I spend a lot of time advocating for my staff and students. I do that, and I try to make—I want people to know this isn't the same school of ten years ago. We're not—it's not a bad place to be. It's a good school to be at. We've got great things going on here, and we're as competitive as anybody else when it comes to education, but even within our own district community, other teachers would look down at [this school] sort of look down at this school and sometimes with that sympathy, "Oh, man. I'm so sorry that you're there." The staff—they're tired of getting beat up all the time. (Principal 1)

Indeed, the students' achievement levels at his school have sometimes led to jealousy among community members rather than acceptance.

I mean there are people who are not super thrilled that this Elementary school came out at 93 percent achievement level in reading. That shouldn't be happening over here, and so people try to replicate that. You know what? There are three schools that have always been our high-performing schools in our district and right now we're runnin' right with them. That does not make some people at those schools happy because the perception is our Hispanic students shouldn't be performing at the same level as their students. (Principal 1)

In short, negative perceptions (of community members, board and district officials, and even staff within one's building) toward Hispanic/Latino/ELL students negatively impacted the principals' sense of autonomy to lead. Given these negative feelings

towards the students and families these principals serve the principal were limited in their influence and hence limited in their autonomy.

**Question 5: Has the increase in student demographics given you more autonomy as a principal?**

The participants were mixed in their responses to this question. From their responses two themes developed. One theme that was surprising to the researcher was the relationship between increased demographics of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students and the No Child Left Behind Legislation. For Principal 1 and Principal 5 the increase of demographics coupled with the No Child Left Behind Legislation has led to growth in their autonomy over certain aspects of their jobs. Specifically, Principal 1 and Principal 5 felt they gained more autonomy over using a common curriculum and teaching practices. A second theme that developed was the concept of Tight/Loose Leadership. Principal 3 and Principal 4 felt strongly that they lost autonomy over their decision making as leaders because the districts tightened their grips over buildings once the Hispanic/Latino/ ELL achievement results began to be reported.

Principal 1 reported that the changing demographics have given him more input in the curriculum as it relates to the district reading program. The previous reading program did not take into account the needs of Hispanic/Latino learners with limited language background knowledge and it did not support ELL learners. As the demographics have changed and there is more emphasis placed on how Hispanic/Latino/ELL students perform, Principal 1, as principal, has had a larger role in deciding the reading curriculum.

10 years ago you had a couple principals from the affluent schools who pushed whole language really, really hard. You had some building administrators and you had reading specialists who pushed for whole-language type of program because it gives us a lotta books. That's not the way to adopt a reading program. It's okay if you're at a school with students who come with reading fluency, not for title schools with Hispanic students having limited reading. Those other schools (non-title schools) they're more like Lake Wobegon where everybody is slightly above average and that's fine. You can get away with it there. Here—we're a Title I school. We have challenging demographics and our kids need to have that direct and explicit instruction. I would say with our demographics now being counted that's changed. It has given us that autonomy and our curriculum director has said, "Look, different buildings have different needs. You hafta' do what you hafta' do." (Principal 1)

Principal 1 surprised me with his next comment regarding his unsolicited thoughts on the No Child Left Behind Legislation.

This might sound strange but in some ways the increase added to NCLB has given me some autonomy. I mean, I really do believe that. Now that how our students perform matters. I think there was a time, like I had said, I think where there was less autonomy. There was a time in our district where everything was common. Well, actually I'll backtrack. There was a time in our district when the pendulum was way over here, and there was a lot of autonomy where we all didn't have a common curriculum. We all didn't have common expectations. Each building kinda fended for themselves. Then, the pendulum started to swing where we moved towards common curriculum, common expectations, common goals. Everything was common. Now, I start to see—then, it was very, very structured. Now, I see the pendulum swinging back a little bit. We have that common curriculum, and I think we'll always have that. That's a good thing. (Principal 1)

Principal 1's perspective on the No Child Left Behind Legislation (NCLB) led to further probing of the other participants perspective on NCLB in light of the changing demographics in their schools and how it impacts their autonomy. Principal 5 has seen a growth in her autonomy in certain areas due to the increased demographics of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students. Her experience is unique as she saw her autonomy increase but also sensed that her teachers might have felt a loss of autonomy as the demographic changes and the high stakes standards increased.

As demographics have changed and high stakes testing has increased I think administrators have gained some autonomy in certain areas. Teachers might not. They believe that they gave up a lot, but I think we were then able to—I don't wanna say dictate—but we were able to implement and we as a district decided what things we were loose on and what things we were tight on—but you're right. We were able to become a bit more—have more say within the system by doing this, which is good. It's good for kids. I think a little bit. I think there are some positives with it, because I think that in a lot of ways it made everyone accountable. Teachers at first really didn't like that. I think teachers feel that they've lost some of their autonomy because we have created this culture of collaboration where we want teachers to work together because we know that that's best when they do that. (Principal 5)

While Principal 5 noted that the balance between principal and teacher autonomy is complicated and some teachers feel that their power has been taken away, she also asserts that teachers and principals are still aligned in working to support what is best for their students.

Some teachers would say yes—the no-child-left-behind—because I'm constantly looking at data has made me lose my autonomy because I can't just close my door and teach my kids the way I wanna teach them. I have to—as a district, we've said we're working in PLCs—we have to do that. I think no-child-left-behind has created challenges but I don't think that it has forced us to do things that we wouldn't wanna do because we always wanna still keep kids first and do what's best for kids. I think of it as an advantage to the student—how is this going to help kids and do what's best for them? (Principal 5)

Principal 2 voiced similar experiences in gaining autonomy in the area of assessment and the ability to focus her staff on the standards.

Good question. I think having demographics which now matter have helped us focus on assessment and gives me more authority to have staff focus on assessment. I know I try to brush up on some assessment history. In Nebraska I know there's the STARS program here, I guess, is what it was, right, and some districts, if they implement it the right way, they had great results. When they switched over to NeSA, it wasn't a big deal cuz they were just going through best practices, whereas the other schools in districts that maybe they just weren't doing it the right way, and then you switch over. I don't understand how some schools can go from 100 percent passing to 38 percent passing like NeSA. Obviously,

they weren't doing the best practices. I do believe our demographics forces us to always consider best practices.

However while Principal 2 had gained some autonomy, she also noted the No Child Left Behind Legislation had a negative impact on principal's autonomy.

As for NCLB I guess I've seen some really horrible effects, I guess, of No Child Left Behind in my last district in terms of not having—you don't have a lot of resources in my prior state of employment, and I don't have a big budget or anything. Then on top of that you have teachers being labeled and schools being labeled, and we can make a lot of growth, and it still doesn't show up on AYP. Sometimes I've been around a bunch of principals where they're just all about the test, and it's not a very good culture and it doesn't feel good to be there. I don't push test-taking strategies. I push teaching kids how to think, read and write. If you really teach them how to do those things through questioning, everything else will take care of itself. I do believe in tracking student growth, but that's just more as a means to plan for professional development and adjust our instruction, not to label. Being labeled as a low performing school really impacts the morale of staff, students and parents and makes our jobs much more difficult. (Principal 2)

Principal 3 was one participant who has not seen his autonomy grow with the change in demographics. He was adamant that the change in demographics in addition to the No Child Left Behind legislation has made it more difficult to have autonomy to lead.

I don't think it (the change in demographics) has given me any more autonomy. Certainly there are things that we do here at the building level that aren't always quite in line with the district, and we just kinda hope we don't get caught. Until we have enough evidence to say, "Hey, this is what we're doing and look at the results that—" Although I am a rule-follower, you teach the topic you're supposed to teach but if you gotta go back and re-teach and you're three days behind or five days behind, I'm okay with that. I made that known, but there were teachers really—I think they were more worried about what was gonna come from district office than they were about what was gonna come from me.

Principal 3 noted that past district leadership with how the No Child Left Behind legislation was implemented impacted his and others' autonomy:

I would say No Child Left Behind kinda really fell in that regimen of our past assistant superintendent who, when we talked about what roles do I have in

deciding, a lot of those were taken away right at the beginning of No Child Left Behind. (Principal 3)

Principal 4 took a different perspective on the No Child Left Behind Legislation, emphasizing the lack of attention to regional cultures in general and not just particular student demographics:

I think the concept is good, but I think that No Child Left Behind was set for the Chicagos and New Yorks, Houstons of the world. It wasn't set for the Nebraskas of the world because I don't think our education was really that bad. Now, we can always get better, but I think there was some have and have nots in some of those inner cities that No Child Left Behind kinda looked at and thought everybody needed to go that way.

In summary, while all participants referenced No Child Left Behind legislation as impacting their autonomy, the degree to which they viewed that impact as negative or positive varied. In terms of curriculum, some participants felt that NCLB legislation enabled them to advocate for curriculum and teaching practices appropriate for Hispanic/Latino/ELL students. At the same time, other participants noted that the emphasis on test scores and the accompanying labels for schools not perceived to be making adequate progress could be demoralizing to teachers and thus negatively impact their ability to lead. Some described NCLB as reinforcing district autonomy rather than site-based autonomy of principals, particularly when teachers feel pressured by district officials to emphasize particular teaching and assessment practices. In short, the impact of NCLB on principal autonomy is complex and multi-layered.

**Tight/Loose leadership.** In *Tight but Loose: A Conceptual Framework for Scaling Up School Reforms*, Marnie Thompson (2007) describes the tension between two opposing factors inherent in any scalable school reform:



On the one hand, a reform will have limited effectiveness and no sustainability if it is not flexible enough to take advantage of local opportunities while accommodating certain unmovable local constraints. On the other hand, a reform needs to maintain fidelity to its core principles, or theory of action, if there is to be any hope of achieving its desired outcomes. The Tight but Loose formulation combines an obsessive adherence to central design principles (the “tight” part) with accommodations to the needs, resources, constraints, and particularities that occur in any school or district (the “loose” part), but only where these do not conflict with the theory of action of the intervention. (Thompson, 2007)

The theme of tight/loose leadership was very apparent from the analysis of the data. This theme was unique as it was the one theme where there was the most differentiation among the participants in their experience with the tightness or looseness in their district. In previous questions there was a greater commonality in their experiences. For this question the participants were divided in their perceptions. As Principal 1, Principal 5 and Principal 2 noted in their previous responses, they felt their ability to tighten aspects of their building on areas of curriculum and assessment gave them more autonomy to lead their buildings. However, Principal 3 and Principal 4 felt strongly they had lost a large degree of their autonomy to lead as a result of a tightening regarding decisions by district officials. Principal 3’s view of a prior district administrator, for instance, represented his perception that district power superseded his autonomy to lead his teachers.

Our past assistant superintendent did a very—although he brought many—several great things to our district, he was pretty heavy-handed in terms of what’s gonna happen, and when it’s gonna happen, and how you’re gonna do it. If you didn’t do it, then he obviously—he found out about it, and you got corrected, and nobody—everybody kinda became fear of that. It was kind of a—although, like I said, he did a lot of great things, there were some things wise that really kinda killed a lot of creativity of a lot of teachers. (Principal 3)

For Principal 4 the change to a more tightly controlled district has challenged his leadership style. While Principal 4 understands a more systematic (tight) approach might be necessary, he still longs to be a site-based leader.

I'm not a micromanager. Some districts, and this one's becoming more of a tight-loose if you use that language, and I was telling my new assistant principal—I said, "I never use that word." In fact, if I were gonna use it, it'd be more like loose-tight because I just think that they're professionals, and they'll do their job the way they can do it that works best for them. If there's something that's not going well, it doesn't necessarily mean that they didn't wanna do it.

Principal 4's perceptions of his lack of autonomy are shaped, in part, by the fact that he had previously implemented site-based leadership but that this autonomy has now been centralized at the district level rather than in his own building:

I liked being site-based where we could do our own thing and spend our own money. I get the benefit for the elementary schools. I get that. Some may have a bigger PTA. Some may have more influential whatever, and so some maybe get more money or different things here. I'm not saying systematic approach is a horrible thing, but really, site-based, when I first was hired here and the superintendent that was here—it was site-based. He said, "If this is what you want, you just tell 'em what you want. This is your budget. You spend what you want." I much preferred that than I do systematic, but that's where we're at. I see some benefits. I do see that it's a little bit more not the haves and the have nots, where everybody's kinda got the same thing. That's good for us as a whole, but when you've been site-based and you've been able to do some things that you've wanted to do, it is harder to go back to systematic. (Principal 4)

The participants' responses demonstrate the delicate balance a tight/loose organization must strive to attain to allow principals the autonomy to do their perceived work and yet allow the district the necessary control. As the demographics in their schools have increased, it would appear for some of the participants the district has in certain areas achieved or approached such a balance. However, for Principal 4 and Principal 3 the tight/loose leadership might be out of balance and thus impacting their

autonomy to lead their schools as the demographics of their student populations have changed.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations**

#### **Summary**

This study was important to conduct as it gave insight into the lived experiences of principals who are facing the challenges of a growing diverse student population in their schools. In particular, it focused on whether these principals feel they have the autonomy necessary to meet the needs of the changing student population. As the research has demonstrated the state of Nebraska will continue to experience growth of Hispanic/Latino students in many of the schools and learning from these principals' experiences can offer insight to district leaders, universities, and communities about what principals feel they need to help students achieve educationally.

Based on the literature review, the researcher concluded that there is a level of autonomy among individuals that must be met if an individual, an organization, or a principal can experience success in meeting the goal or goals set forth. This was evident from the literature summarizing research in the fields of psychology, business, and education. However, the research also indicates there is a need to clearly define autonomy for individuals, organizations, or building principals in order to experience success in reaching one's goals.

We now can discuss the findings of this research and make further recommendations for the reader to consider.

## Discussion

**What qualities are necessary to be an effective principal of a building with a growing population of Hispanic/Latino students?** The findings of this question were reinforced by current literature regarding effective principal practices. The participants identified the following areas as necessary qualities of an effective principal: curriculum and instruction, emphasis on reading, ability to use data and interventions based on that data, ability to communicate with families, and vision.

The responses of the participants closely align with The 2012 Wallace Foundation Report. This report identified five necessary practices for an effective school principal:

1. shaping a vision of academic success for all students, based on high standards;
2. creating a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail;
3. cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their parts in realizing the school vision;
4. improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost; and
5. managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement.

But the question for this dissertation just wasn't what made an effective principal—it asked what made an effective principal of a building with a growing population of Hispanic/Latino students. The participants identified knowledge about reading and communicating with families as must haves for an effective principal of this type of school. Their responses clearly indicated they have knowledge regarding working with their student population and their needs. Flynn and Miller reinforced the principals' reflection from their research. As a starting point, principals—particularly principals of middle level and high schools—must become more familiar with the research on language acquisition for ELL students (Flynn & Miller, 2008).

**What obstacles currently exist which limit your autonomy to be an effective principal within your district as it relates to the changing demographic population?**

The participants shared two overriding concerns related to lack of autonomy: making decisions regarding budgets and staffing.

There was a strong consensus among the participants in their perceived limitations when it came to resources and staffing. The participants felt and expressed they had little autonomy to hire staff or make staffing decisions. This finding is important as research by Whitmire (2012) has suggested that hiring staff is an essential requirement for improving teaching and learning, “For principals to fulfill their obligations to improve teaching and learning, hire and support excellent teaching staff, and establish a healthy school culture, they must be empowered to make the basic school-based decisions” (p. 7).

When you consider Whitmire’s (2012) findings with the recommendations put forth by the Wallace Foundation regarding characteristics of effective principals (which include “*creating a climate with a cooperative spirit and the ability of a principal to manage people*”), limiting the principal’s autonomy to at least participate in hiring practices raises concern. The participant, Principal 3 reported his frustration with his loss of autonomy in hiring: “It’s funny the answer to that question on staffing because my first ten years here, any ELL position we had, I would interview for it on my own, and I would hire it on my own. In the last few years, that has been taken away.”

The principals also expressed a loss or lack of autonomy with monetary resources and decisions. Principal 2 could not control her Title budget to implement changes she saw as necessary, Principal 3 was not able to purchase science texts his staff saw as

necessary for improving opportunities for ELL students, and Principal 4 was not able to purchase technology. The inability to purchase resources at the building level goes against Whitmire's (2012) recommendations needed for principals to address the needs of low-performing schools. Indeed, Whitmire states that while all schools need effective principals, strong principal leadership is particularly important for low-performing schools in need of rapid improvement and may be the deciding factor between success and failure (p. 2).

The participants indicated being able to analyze data and implement interventions was an essential characteristic of being an effective principal of a school with a growing student population of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students.

Knowing about data is critical. What does your data tell you and how do you collect, analyze and make decisions on what you modify, build upon or blow up based on the data. Knowing what resources do you have in place or what resources you need are critical. (Principal 3)

However from the analysis of their responses, it does raise concern if these principals have the autonomy to implement the necessary interventions to meet the needs of their students. Adamowski et al. (2007) recommend that reducing the autonomy gap for principals to increase results means creating additional flexibility especially in staffing and budgeting (p. 36). It is difficult to have "rapid improvement" when principals are not able to utilize available resources as they deem necessary. What impact this lack of autonomy over resources could be having on student achievement is a question that warrants further study.

**What obstacles to autonomy does the demographic increase of Hispanic/Latino population itself bring which impacts your autonomy to be an effective principal?** The participants clearly identified the themes of communication and poverty as obstacles to their autonomy as principals. As the literature has pointed out, Hispanic students and families incur a higher level of poverty than other cultural groups in the United States. And research on the impact of higher levels of poverty also indicates there is often an increase in mental health issues. Looking at the first theme of communication, the lack of Spanish speakers applying and working for the schools where these principals work is disturbing and needs to be addressed. If the Hispanic/Latino/ELL students are to achieve at the same levels as their peers, school districts need to actively seek out employees to represent their schools' student diversity.

As pluralism increases, the teaching profession must reflect that diversity. It is essential for *all* teachers to have the knowledge, skills, and training to successfully teach diverse student populations. But it is equally important for *all* students to have the opportunity to be taught by teachers who reflect their diversity. Thousands of members of diverse ethnic and racial groups have the ability, skills, and knowledge to be outstanding teachers—and we need them. Minority educators enhance our students' understanding of the intellectual, social, political, and economic complexity of our democratic society. (Futrell, 1999, p. 30)

Principals must have an understanding of how the combination of language, poverty, the Hispanic Culture and the status of power affect the learning of Hispanic and Latino students in schools. Being knowledgeable of the culture of Hispanics and best instructional practices for that group provides the impetus for school leadership to initiate instructional practices to improve this group's academic achievement (Banks & Banks, 1989)



It was evident from the participants' responses that they understood the complexity of the challenges they needed to address in order to best serve the growing populations of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students in their districts. However, the lack of resources in the area of communicating with families and students was evident and without question limited the autonomy of the principals. The time needed and the inability to intervene due to the difficulties in communication places these principals at a distinct disadvantage to enact change.

It was also clear that the poverty level of the Hispanic/Latino/ELL families challenged principals. Principals who noted they lack the autonomy in staffing and budget decisions are struggling to overcome the impact that poverty has on student achievement. The results of these participants' experiences at minimum point out a need for districts and principals to engage in meaningful conversation regarding the impact of poverty and how to intervene in the most effective manner. If these principals' experiences are common to other principals dealing with the impact of poverty as it relates to Hispanic /Latino/ELL students, then there is a great deal of work to be done. It would be worth the time to investigate areas where districts or schools have had success despite high poverty coupled with an increased population of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students.

**With the increase in the Hispanic student population have there been any external obstacles you have encountered which has impacted your autonomy to be a principal?** It was disappointing to find that all five participants reported negative perceptions held by others of their schools and of the Hispanic/Latino/ELL students and

their families. While researchers Hamann et al. (2002) discussed the impact these attitudes have on Latino students, “Some members of host communities overtly denigrate the newcomers and fantasize about returning to a pre-Latino state; many do not. Even most of these, however, nonetheless participate in educational policies and practices that often label and constrain Latino students” (p. 4), we need to also consider the impact these perceptions and attitudes have on principals’ autonomy to lead their buildings. Principal 5 discussed how the negative perceptions of her students impacted a bond initiative as members of the community did not want to support a bond that helped “those students.”

Consider the dilemma Principal 1 faces with the perceptions in his district:

We’ve got great things going on here, and we’re as competitive as anybody else when it comes to education, but even within our own district community, other teachers would look down at (the school), sort of look down at this school and sometimes with that sympathy, “Oh, man. I’m so sorry that you’re there.” The staff—they’re tired of getting beat up all the time. (Principal 1)

We have to consider the implications of this statement in the light of the research regarding teacher and principal retention. It takes approximately five years to put a teaching staff in place as well as fully implement the policies and practices that will positively impact school performance; however principal and teacher turnover can negatively impact student achievement for several years (Center for Public Education, 2012). If the staff, as Principal 1 reports, is tired of getting beat up all the time, it is not difficult to conclude that some teachers may choose to leave rather than deal with the negative perceptions. If the staff retention is impacted it thus has an impact on the principal’s autonomy.

Or consider Principal 2's situation where she reports school board members don't frequent her building like the other affluent schools in the district. How might this impact her ability as she doesn't feel she has a strong enough voice to impact or initiate the change factors necessary to increase student achievement?

It is apparent from the participants' responses that the negative perceptions placed upon their constituents impacts their autonomy. Battling these perceptions takes time and energy away from other critical duties and it places these principals at a disadvantage. It would be important to further investigate community perceptions around the state. Are there examples of communities where steps have been taken to welcome Hispanic/Latino students and families? If so, how can other districts study and learn from these positive examples?

**Has the increase in student demographics given you more autonomy as a principal?** This question developed an interesting discussion piece to consider as it elicited the most dichotomous response from the participants. Up until this question there was a very close alignment in regard to how the principals perceived their autonomy. However, as the analysis of the data in regards to this question unfolded, the researcher discovered some differing views on autonomy based around the themes of No Child Left Behind Legislation and Tight/Loose Leadership.

When I asked Principal 1 the question "Has the increase in student demographics given you more autonomy as a principal?" I will admit I was not prepared for the answer he gave me. I had not originally considered asking a question about the No Child Left Behind Legislation. But upon hearing his response to my initial question I made the

decision to probe this issue with the other participants. Principal 1 felt strongly NCLB has increased his autonomy as a building principal. “This might sound strange but in some ways the increase added to NCLB has given me some autonomy. I mean, I really do believe that. Now that how our students perform matters” (Principal 1).

Principal 5’s experience with the No Child Left Behind Legislation was similar in that she felt she gained more autonomy to help staff focus on best instructional practices and on data.

As demographics have changed and high stakes testing has increased I think administrators have gained some autonomy in certain areas.

I think no-child-left-behind has created challenges but I don’t think that it has forced us to do things that we wouldn’t wanna do because we always wanna still keep kids first and do what’s best for kids. I think of it as an advantage student—how is this going to help kids and do what’s best for them? (Principal 5)

These were significant responses when reflected against the research done by Hightower et al. (2002) who claim school principals were once the lead agency of reform but argue that now NCLB has taken autonomy from building principals and placed increased school reform policies in the hands of district office officials. They claim that since NCLB “districts have moved from perceived as bureaucratic backwaters of education policy to being seen as potent sites and sources of educational reform” (p. 1).

Principal 3’s response regarding how he perceived the impact of NCLB on his autonomy was more indicative of the research findings of Hightower et al. (2002).

Principal 2’s response to the question resulted in mixed feelings. On one hand she had gained some autonomy but also had reservations about the impact of the NCLB Legislation.

I think having demographics which now matter have helped us focus on assessment and gives me more authority to have staff focus on assessment. But I've seen some really horrible effects, I guess, of No Child Left Behind in my last district in terms of not having—you don't have a lot of resources in my prior state of employment, and I don't have a big budget or anything. Then on top of that you have teachers being labeled and schools being labeled, and we can make a lot of growth, and it still doesn't show up on AYP.

Principal 4 offered a different perspective but even when I pressed him regarding whether he gained or lost autonomy as a result of NCLB he didn't have an opinion but what he did offer was this:

I think the concept is good, but I think that No Child Left Behind was set for the Chicagos and New Yorks, Houstons of the world. It wasn't set for the Nebraskas of the world because I don't think our education was really that bad. Now, we can always get better, but I think there was some have and have nots in some of those inner cities that No Child Left Behind kinda looked at and thought everybody needed to go that way.

The differing responses of the participants to the No Child Left Behind Legislation is interesting to contemplate. Would the majority of principals feel the No Child Left Behind Legislation has provided the impetus for principals to gain autonomy as is the perspective of Principal 5 and Principal 1? Or would the majority feel as Principal 3 does about the loss of autonomy as a result of NCLB? It is a significant question to investigate further.

Equally significant was the response Principal 5 gave as to how from her perspective principals have gained some autonomy from NCLB and teachers have lost some of their autonomy.

Teachers might not. They believe that they gave up a lot, but I think we were then able to—I don't wanna say dictate—but we were able to implement and we as a district decided what things we were loose on and what things we were tight on—but you're right. We were able to become a bit more—have more say within the system by doing this, which is good. It's good for kids. I think a little bit. I

think there are some positives with it, because I think that in a lot of ways it made everyone accountable. Teachers at first really didn't like that. I think teachers feel that they've lost some of their autonomy because we have created this culture of collaboration where we want teachers to work together because we know that that's best when they do that.

Principal 5's response provides discussion worth investigating for future research. Does this mean it is necessary for teachers to lose autonomy for principals to gain autonomy? Would this be a common experience of other schools with changing student demographics?

The theme of tight/loose leadership also developed through an analysis of the data in regard to the question: Has the increase in student demographics given you more autonomy as a principal? Principal 1, Principal 5, and Principal 2 felt in certain areas that the districts they worked for had achieved a balance that provide tight enough structures for guidance but loose enough for autonomy. Principal 1 perceived that he was given enough autonomy to impact the reading curriculum for the district through his work. Principal 5 was able to enact specific teaching strategies for her staff to follow and the staff development necessary to effectively train staff to use the strategies. Principal 2 eventually was able to implement a phonics program with appropriate staff development to increase student achievement. While all three still wanted more autonomy to impact budget decisions and staffing, they felt supported by their districts in other areas to implement changes they saw as critical to impact their students.

Principal 3 and Principal 4, on the other hand, felt they were losing their autonomy to be effective building leaders as the districts tightened holds on the decision-making abilities of these two principals. Principal 3 and Principal 4's perspective of their

experiences would tend to fall in line with the research conducted in 2007 by Adamowski et al. who found principals see their roles changed to middle managers as opposed to school leaders:

Squeezed between federal, state, and district policies, procedures, and contractual obligations on one side, and classroom teachers (and other school staff members) on the other, the district principals whom we interviewed see themselves as middle managers, not as CEOs or necessarily even instructional leaders. They find themselves balancing the challenge of maintaining a school climate that is conducive to teaching and learning with the need to accommodate the outside pressures, reporting requirements, and demands of the district and state. Indeed, many principals commented that they feel responsible for buffering their staff from external demands and policies so as to maximize the potential of their schools' learning environments. (p. 33)

Consider the earlier statements of Principal 4 (p. 77) and Principal 3 (p. 78) as it pertains to their perceived loss of autonomy. Both felt a considerable loss of their autonomy to lead their school. These statements lead one to wonder if the tight/loose leadership from the district is out of balance. If two experienced principals who shared a zealot-like passion for their students' success feel their autonomy to lead has been significantly impacted, are they able to create the best results for students? Researchers contend the tight/loose balance is difficult at times to manage. DuFour (2007) states that the most essential element of effective loose-tight leadership is getting tight about the right things. Are the district leaders right about what they are controlling? Why is it that Principal 5, Principal 2, and Principal 1's reflections indicated they have more autonomy to make decisions in regards to their students and buildings? The danger of having a district with too tight of hold over a district can be found from Whitmere (2012) who states that the lack of autonomy to make key decisions forces principals most committed to being

successful to break the rules to get the outcomes they want for kids (p. 7). Consider Whitmere's assertions in light of Principal 3's experience.

I don't think it (the change in demographics) has given me any more autonomy. Certainly there are things that we do here at the building level that aren't always quite in line with the district, and we just kinda hope we don't get caught.

Is Principal 3's experience with loss of autonomy congruent with other principals across the state or an anomaly? The stated fact that a principal is willing to risk implementing practices which go against the district to lead a building should raise concern and warrants further investigation with other principals and districts across the state. It would also be recommended to study districts where there has been an amiable working relationship between districts and building leaders despite the increase in Hispanic/Latino demographics. How have these districts balanced the loose/tight leadership? What could other districts learn and implement as a result of studying these successful districts?

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

1. This study was limited to five principals. In order to further strengthen the findings it would be important to conduct further research with a larger number of principals who have had an increase in Hispanic/Latino/ELL students to ascertain if the findings of this study would be similar.
2. It would be important to see if the loss of autonomy as shared through the perspectives of the principals of this study are limited to just those whose demographics have changed or is the loss of autonomy a more widespread phenomenon experienced by principals regardless of demographic shifts?



3. If one discovered principals who feel that they have autonomy in their roles or their autonomy has remain unchanged despite the increase of Hispanic/Latino/ELL students, an in-depth study of these principals should be done to discover what has allowed them to maintain their autonomy. Those findings would be important to share with district leaders as it might influence some of their current practices.

### **Recommendations for Further Practice**

This study has discussed the demographic increases, which can be expected in this nation and this state in the future. To address these future challenges, recommendations include the following:

1. Develop a consortium of principals who are faced with the challenges of having an increased Hispanic/Latino population and encourage dialogue along with a best practices manifesto to build efficacy among principals and give a greater voice in the state.
2. Identify districts who have found the balance of a tight/loose leadership system and then identify the steps those districts have taken to maintain the balance between the tight practices while also allowing principal autonomy.
3. Encourage college teacher preparation programs to focus on ELL certification of all teachers and to encourage bilingual speakers to consider teaching as a profession.

**Conclusion**

This phenomenological qualitative study attempted to explore the autonomy experienced by a group of Nebraska public school principals to lead their respective schools where the Hispanic/Latino student population has increased substantially over the past decade. This study attempts to identify if the principals' autonomy has increased, decreased, or been impacted in any manner due to these changes of student demographics. The central question was: Do principals in schools with growing Hispanic/Latino student numbers feel (report) they have the autonomy to lead initiatives that respond to the needs of these students? The results of this study would indicate they do not have the autonomy (specifically as it relates to staffing and budgeting authority over resources). Their autonomy to lead as effective principals of schools with an increased Hispanic/Latino/ELL student population has been diminished.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Informed Consent**



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES  
Department of Educational Administration

**Participant Informed Consent Form**

**Project# 13360**

Title: Principals' experiences of autonomy in Nebraska schools with increased Hispanic/Latino student populations

**Purpose of Research:**

This research project seeks to help the educational community understand how or if principal autonomy has been shaped as a result of a growing population of Hispanic/Latino students. I am a doctoral candidate in the department of Educational Administration at the University of Nebraska Lincoln and the principal of a Title I middle school in the Lincoln Public School District. I am conducting a qualitative study of five principals in the state of Nebraska. You are invited to participate in this study because you are a principal of a school where there is a growing percentage of Hispanic/Latino English Language Learners.

**Procedures:**

You will be asked to participate in two interviews that focus on your perceptions and experiences with autonomy in your role as a principal. These interviews are designed to capture your experiences leading a school with changing demographics and the impact of these changes on your autonomy to lead. One interview will be 30-40 minutes in length and be conducted via the phone. The second interview will be a face-to-face interview requiring an hour to an hour and fifteen minutes of your time. This interview would be conducted at your school. Both interviews will be audio recorded. Additional questions may be asked via phone or email to clarify questions I might have.

I will be keeping detailed notes of what I observe while conducting the interviews. These observations will help me to paint a picture of what I see in the office, at the school and in the surrounding community. These field notes will document my observations and be used to develop potential follow-up questions.

**Benefits:**

There are no direct benefits to you as a research participant. But many people do generally enjoy the opportunity to talk about their educational and work experiences.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

**Confidentiality:**

With your permission I would like to audiotape the interviews. You are not expected to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. The transcriptions will be professionally transcribed but rest assured the person will sign an agreement to not disclose any of the information. Myself, the transcriptionist and my advisor, Dr. Miles Bryant, will have access to the tapes. Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law and your identity will not be revealed in the final manuscript. Upon completion of the manuscript, all tapes will be destroyed. Additionally, all informal notes will be coded to ensure anonymity. Any information obtained during this study that could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator's office and will only be seen by the investigator during the study and for one year after the study is complete. The information obtained in this study may be published in professional journals or presented at professional meetings but the data will be reported as aggregated data.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may contact the investigator(s) at the phone numbers below. Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 to voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

This consent document includes the minimum information set by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP). Based upon a particular study, you may be required to include additional detail. Additional templates and electronic versions of each document are available on the Office Research Responsibility's website at <http://research.unl.edu/orr/forms.shtml>.

after the study is complete. The information obtained in this study may be published in professional journals or presented at professional meetings but the data will be reported as aggregated data.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may contact the investigator(s) at the phone numbers below. Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 to voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

**Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you agree to participate, please sign below and return this letter to me in the envelope provided. A second copy is for your records. If you have any questions about the study or the procedures for data collection, please contact me at 402-421-6687 or at 402-436-1210 or you can email me at [gczapla@lps.org](mailto:gczapla@lps.org) or my advisor [mbryant1@unl.edu](mailto:mbryant1@unl.edu). If you have any questions regarding the rights of research participants, you can contact the University of Nebraska at Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_ Initial if you agree to be audio recorded during the interview.

I have read the procedure described above for the study of principal autonomy. I agree to participate in the study and I have received a copy of this description.

**Signature of Participant:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Name and Phone number of investigator(s)**

Gary Czapla, MA, Principle Investigator Office: (402) 436-1210  
Miles Bryant, Ph.D., Secondary Investigator Office (402) 472-0960

## **Appendix B**

### **Principal Contact**



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IRB Number: 20130513360 EX  
Project ID: 13360

May 2013

Dear Fellow Principal

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Gary Czapla and I am currently working on a doctoral dissertation through the University of Nebraska Lincoln under the guidance of Dr. Miles Bryant. I am also currently the principal of Charles Culler Middle School in Lincoln, Nebraska. The research I am performing examines principal's autonomy in schools where there has been an increase in the Hispanic/Latino student population and an increasing Hispanic/Latino ELL population. Your school was one of several selected through an examination of student demographic information obtained from the Nebraska Department of Education website.

This e-mail is to invite you to participate in this study. The study will be a qualitative study, which would require you to participate in a 30-minute phone interview and an hour and 15 minute face-to-face interview at your school. It is possible an additional phone conversation may be necessary to clarify any information or ask additional questions. The interviews will be audio taped and transcribed professionally for analysis. Your name will not appear in the dissertation, as a pseudonym will be used in place of your name and the identity of the building will also not be reflected. Your participation in this research is completely voluntary and your responses will be confidential. You are free to decide not to participate in this research project but I would greatly appreciate your help. Any information obtained during this study, which may identify you, will be kept strictly confidential. Interview data will be kept for 5 years after the completion of the study. Confidential data will be kept for approximately 1 year after the completion of the study or until the researcher has defended the dissertation. Confidential data will then be destroyed. All information will remain confidential. There are no known risks for participating in this study.

Your participation in this important study will help educators understand if changing demographics of Hispanic/Latino populations impact principals' ability to lead their respective schools. Please e-mail me at [gczapla@lps.org](mailto:gczapla@lps.org) within the next 10 days to let me know if you would be willing to participate in this study. If you agree to participate I will send you a letter of informed consent for you to sign and return in the addressed envelope. An additional copy will be included for your records. If you have questions concerning this study you can contact me at (402) 436-1210.

Thank you for your time.

Professionally yours,

Gary Czapla  
Principal Investigator  
[gczapla@lps.org](mailto:gczapla@lps.org)  
(402) 436-1210

Dr. Miles Bryant  
Secondary Investigator  
[mbryant1@unl.edu](mailto:mbryant1@unl.edu)  
(402) 472-0960